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Elspeth Nelson

The importance of absence: an
investigation into the significance of
resilience in retention on Higher
Education courses in a Further
Education College

Submitted for the Open University
Professional Doctorate in Education
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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of former students in Higher Education (HE) within one college and staff in three general further education (GFE) colleges. The focus of the research is one of the GFE colleges, known as 'Northsall' College, where 17 per cent of HE students withdrew from their programmes before completion (Northsall MIS, 2013-14, Appendix 1).

The number of individuals who leave a degree course before completion is measured by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Retention rates are performance indicators for higher education providers, so if attrition rates are high, then education providers need to understand why in order to retain more students. One way to improve retention is for educators and students to understand and develop the concept of resilience. This is especially important because of the Government policy of widening participation (WP) where non-traditional students may require added support. The challenge of retaining students on their higher education in further education (HE in FE) programme led to the research title: *'An investigation into the significance of resilience in retention on Higher Education courses in a Further Education College'*.

The inter-dependent issues affecting student resilience and retention are grouped into three overarching themes. First, factors individual to the student such as personal resilience, which can be difficult to define and therefore subject to misuse. Second, institutional factors, such as student experiences of teaching and learning. Third, the policy context, which includes the neoliberal 'marketisation' policy and how it may impact on student expectations and resilience. Students as consumers, especially those referred to as

widening participation, are often the least powerful and least well-equipped influencers of college policy.

The research adopted an interpretive method of enquiry and qualitative data was collected by semi structured interviews with ten students who had left Northsall College before completing their study. Interviews were also conducted with three members of teaching staff at Northsall and three 'Student Services Officers' (SSOs), one from Northsall and two from other local colleges.

The findings suggest that students' ability to be resilient against the stressors they may encounter can be affected by personal or course issues which affect one or more domains of their life, like weights on a traditional balance scale (Bergmann et al. 2019: 1). Student relationships with tutors and staff at Northsall College can be an important source of resilience support to students who are vulnerable to dropping out and are often an unlikely antidote to quasi marketisation measures (Allan et al., 2014). Unfortunately, staff support can be variable, often because of the marketisation of college priorities. (Tomlinson, 2014).

The research recommends the use of a resilience 'tool kit' to identify and support HE in FE students at risk of dropping out. Group discussion of the term 'resilience' is also suggested to inform and empower students about their own resilience. The use of student services officers (SSO) as an intermediary in conducting research into students who have left and as someone who could step in and support student resilience, when tutors are unavailable, is also a recommendation. Finally, further research is suggested into the experiences of

students who may be at risk of dropping out of their higher education programmes in further education colleges.

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Lastly, I would like to give heartfelt thanks to the courageous student and staff participants who candidly shared their stories with me. We all have the same desire to support continuing education. To that end, this research seeks to advance improvement of the experience of students in Further and Higher education in the UK.

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Statement of Terms and Glossary

AoC Association of Colleges

APMS The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey

BIS Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

DfE Department for Education

DfES Department for Education and Skills

ESFA The Education and Skills Funding Agency

Faculty A The arts faculty at Northsall

Faculty B The faculty containing all non-arts subjects at Northsall.

FD Foundation Degree

FE Further education

FE in HE Higher education course run in an FE college

FEI Further Education Institution

GFE General Further Education College

HE Higher education

HEI Higher Education Institution

HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England

HESA The Higher Education Statistics Agency

HREC Human Research Ethics Committee

IAG Information and Guidance

MHF The Mental health Foundation

NIACE National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

QAA Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

QCA Curriculum and Qualifications Authority

OfS Office for Students

Ofsted Office for Standards in Education

POLAR The participation of local areas (in Higher Education)

RQ Research Question

SSO Student Services Officer

TUNDRA Tracking Under representation by Area

UCAS University and Colleges Admissions Service

VLE The Virtual learning Environment

WP refers to Widening Participation which is a term for non-traditional and WP cohort learners, those who are less likely to participate in post 16 and higher education (McGivney, 1993). There is a fuller discussion of Widening Participation in the third section of chapter 2.

For the purposes of this research, all staff, students and identifying places have been assigned fictitious names or none to ensure their anonymity.

Throughout, the student participants are known as:

Gill, Ellie, Valentina, Ross, Karla, Julia, Jake, Lana, Leah, Kane

And the Staff Participants, Tutors: Dee, Martin and Stella and Student Services Officers (SSOs): Mike, June and Sally

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The background to the research

Defining Further Education (FE) can be complex. Before incorporation in 1993, it broadly meant any course of study which is undertaken after compulsory education, that is, after the age of 16, which is not taken at degree level within a university. After 1993 General Further Education (GFE) colleges evolved their provision and increasingly offer degree level courses and accept students from the age of 14 (Hodgson, 2015). Additional institutions, such as private training providers may also be considered as 'FE' and, in addition, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may offer sub degree level qualifications (Hodgson, 2015).

The Further Education sector is located within post 16 and continuing education within the UK. It encompasses 2.2 million students (Association of Colleges (AoC), 2019: 2) at 244 colleges; these comprise 168 General Further Education (GFE) colleges, 51 sixth form colleges and 13 land-based colleges (AoC, 2019:3). They provide a very diverse range of courses including academic, vocational and recreational qualifications (Education and Training (ET) Foundation, 2019). General Further Education colleges are one of the main providers of Further Education in the UK and have a greater focus on workplace training and technical and professional skills than other providers (ETFoundation, 2019).

The Further Education sector has been described as the 'Cinderella service' within continuing education provision (Willis, 2001). The implication is that FE has traditionally provided the majority of vocational and technical education programmes but without receiving a great deal of recognition or funding. It has been described as 'invisible' by

Randle and Brady (1997:122) and yet has provided for a greater proportion of post compulsory learners than the Higher Education or compulsory education sectors combined. There has been shrinkage in the sector as it educated four million learners in 2012-13 but this has reduced to around 2.2 million at the time of writing in 2019 (AoC, 2019). This may be due to the reduction in funding it has experienced consistently in the years since incorporation in 1993, and even more severely since the election of a coalition government in 2010 and subsequent 'austerity measures' (Hodgson, 2015). General Further Education colleges evolved from Technical Colleges, which were created to respond to the skills needs of the local economy and this has influenced its structure and provision. The opportunity for diversification and funding offered by the introduction of foundation degrees (FDs) in 2001 was an ideal opportunity for the sector. FDs often bolstered the smaller HE provision running in GFEs, mostly Higher National Certificates and Diplomas. It was also an opportunity to widen participation by offering highly localised Higher Education (HE) provision.

1.1.1 Northsall College

The majority of the research took place in one, large, GFE college (described here as 'Northsall') which offers HE courses. As one of the larger GFEs, Northsall can offer useful insight into strategies to support WP cohorts. Any generalisations made within the research can be tempered by the inclusion of staff participants from two other GFEs which contrast with Northsall in terms of size and location as both are situated in towns. Northsall has an annual enrolment, at the time of the research, of over 30,000 on a range of full and part time courses from entry to level seven. Located within the centre of a northern UK city, Northsall students' GCSE grades are amongst the lowest in the region.

Based on an index of multiple deprivation in 2015, it is in the top ten most deprived local authorities in England (The English Indices of Deprivation, 2019). The HE provision within Northsall College tends to recruit from this profile of students (Northsall MIS, 2013-14). This means that it has a higher than average for the FE sector number of, what could be described as, widening participation (WP) students. Widening participation is a term for those who are less likely to participate in post 16 and higher education provision (McGivney, 1993). This research aims to provide useful insight into strategies to support WP students.

Ofsted described Northsall College at the time of the research as 'good' at inspection (reference withheld). This is typical of many other FEIs in the sector. It is based at a city site where the higher education division delivers a wide range of Higher National, Foundation Degree and Bachelors' programmes through validating partners. Northsall noted that a number of Higher Education (HE) students each year leave their programme of study before completion (Northsall MIS, 2013-14, Appendix 1). College data over 'long programmes' (one year or more) for the following academic years, revealed withdrawals as: 20 per cent in 2010-11; 19 per cent in 2011-12; 20 per cent in 2012-13 and in 2013-14 17 per cent (Northsall MIS, 2013-14, Appendix 1). This demonstrates a four-year trend of non-completion of between 17 and 20 per cent. The research was motivated by this data.

The Higher Education provision at Northsall covers a wide variety of subject areas and is divided into two faculties. The Arts faculty includes subjects like Fine Arts, Acting and architecture (Faculty A). The other faculty tends to cover anything not connected with creative subjects and includes diverse disciplines such as: Health and Social Care,

Engineering, Construction, and Business courses (Faculty B). At the time of the research, retention was similar for each of the faculties and therefore emphasis has not been placed on subject choice as a possible cause of drop out (College MIS, 2013-14, Appendix 1). Nevertheless, the faculties are represented within the research, so that any differences between participant responses due to subject can be noted. The researcher was employed at Northsall.

Teaching staff in HE in FE institutions, such as those at Northsall College, tend to be known as tutors and this has been used as the default term within this research. Sometimes the participants have used the terms, 'lecturers' or 'teachers'. No distinction is made between these terms. They all refer to the role of designing and facilitating teaching and learning and being employed on an academic contract in a GFE college.

1.1.2 Widening Participation at Northsall

Northsall is successful in attracting many non-traditional, widening participation (WP) learners, many of whom Dearing identified as under-represented in higher education. The HE in FE learners at Northsall can be identified as a WP cohort (McGivney, 1993; The Dearing Report, 1997). Northsall's management information systems (MIS) track and report to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and Office for Students and Research (OfS) and note the proportion of students who are defined as WP (see Appendix 2).

The problems associated with recruiting and retaining widening participation students has been the subject of research by many, for example, Gilborn and Mirza (2000:7); Archer et al. (2005:75); McDonough and Fann, (2007:269) and the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2015:10). There will be a fuller discussion of the term WP in the next chapter.

1.2 The recording of student withdrawal

The starting point for investigating HE in FE student withdrawals is their recording via a college devised form. This form is relevant to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and is superficial in its approach. The reasons are pre-categorised, so a decision must be made by the tutor regarding the closest match to the reason for the student withdrawing. These categories are vague, and they include ‘non-attender’, ‘personal reasons’, or ‘written off after a lapse of time’. They do not fully explain either the underlying cause for the student leaving, since non-attendance is often a symptom rather than a cause of difficulty; - nor why these situations are overwhelming to some students and not to others (O’Donnell, 2009; Rutter, 2012).

Nationally, non-continuation rates for students in low participation areas in the UK were just over 8 per cent in 2014-15 and just under 6 per cent in other areas, and these have changed little since 2009-10 (SMF, 2016). The definition of non-retention used by the Skills Funding Agency; (From 2017 the Education and Skills Funding Agency) was, ‘*Young people (16+) who drop out of education and skills courses or who are not successful*’ (Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, 2015:5). This is the definition most often used in the FE

sector and therefore the one this research will also use, applying it to include adults, that is those over 19, rather than only young people (HESA, 2020).

In Further Education, to minimise the impact of poor retention, learning aims are usually no longer than a year in what Robertson (1994:10) termed an '*achievement led curriculum*'. In HE in FE, by comparison, the length of the learning aims tend to be significantly longer, where two and three years are common. Hence, retention rates are lower than FE: 90.4 per cent in Further Education compared to 81 per cent in HE in FE in 2013-14 (see Appendix 1). By contrast, achievement rates tend to be higher. In the HE division of Northsall College, achievement of those retained was especially robust and there are rates of 99 per cent in 2013-14. This means that increasing achievement rates would only achieve a minimal improvement to overall college performance. Retention has the greater potential for improvement, which is why it is the focus of this research.

National benchmarking for the Higher Education sector is underdeveloped, certainly in terms of comparable subject areas, which makes it difficult to generalise across the sector. This contrasts with FE, where this information has been available for many years. Nationally, across the HE sector, since 2014-15, non-continuation rates among mature, full-time first-degree students have seen an increase in the last few years: between 12.3 per cent in 2014-15 rising to 13.6 in 2017-18. Non-continuation rates for young, full-time students in the UK has seen an increase from 6.5 in 2014-15 to 6.8 in 2017-18 (HESA, 2020). These rates suggest that retaining HE students in all sectors is still both an institutional and national concern.

It is also worth noting the use within the Further Education sector of a variety of terms to denote student non-continuation. The term 'drop out' is possibly the most objective in describing the student's action and experience of leaving the college and may be one phrase used by students themselves. All terms that indicate students leaving their course of study have been used interchangeably within this research and are usually selected according to whether the discussion is more student focussed or management focussed. Terms such as 'withdrawal', 'retention', 'attrition' and 'non-continuation' are those which seem to be more management focussed (Hodgson, 2015). The increasing use of these terms seems to reflect the growing marketisation of the FE sector and the influence it exerts over staff and students alike (Smith, 2015).

1.2.1 Non-continuation or poor retention?

The Further Education Funding Council introduced tracking of completion and non-completion rates (FEFC, 1993). The motivation was a report by the Audit Commission in 1993 into the effectiveness of Further Education course provision which led to the implementation of measures to penalise colleges for students who did not stay and achieve the qualification for which they enrolled (Lumby, 1996). This new funding methodology meant students who left the course before completion incurred a financial penalty; - for the institution, of up to 50 per cent (GOV.UK, 2015, updated 2018). This change in policy involved maximising the use of funding and initiating efficiency savings through greater accountability, thus introducing the concept of marketisation to the Further and Higher Education sectors, which was a significant change in the ethos of adult and further education (Spours et al., 2008; Smith, 2015). Marketisation means the

exposure of education to market forces and expecting colleges to act as a competitive business with an eye to the bottom line.

The neoliberal underpinning of education policy after the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher challenged the very nature of education as a public endeavour. The introduction of market forces into education, was, in reality more of a, 'quasi-market' (Le Grand et al., 2008). This meant that the accountability and financial dependence of FE colleges increased in terms of central government control via funding accountability (Hodgson, 2015). Any financial gains in one institution was at the expense of local competitors who were also state funded, and their colleges' ability to fully embrace the potential of free market decision making was curtailed (Le Grand et al., 2008; Callender and Dougherty, 2018). Post- 1992 funding accountability also meant the responsibility for retention and achievement was shifting from the student to their tutor and the college itself. After 1992, there was a frenzied effort on the part of FE colleges to meet the demands of the new accountability they were facing, with regard to monitoring (Dennis, 2016). By 2005, increasing the recruitment of students to programmes of study and attempting to minimise withdrawals became as important a focus of activity as teaching and learning. From 2005 to 2010, the FE sector generally fared better in terms of funding; - and FEIs utilised the resources made available to them to meet targets for retention and achievement. This meant that students who did not want to stay on their course were termed, 'non-continuers', being left to leave when appropriate and without pressure. Poor retention was not unduly penalised because average figures remained enough to meet targets (Hodgson, 2015).

The new coalition government, after 2010, exerted successively more financial pressure with a reduction of funding, from the Treasury to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). This was estimated by Keep (2014) as a 43 per cent reduction between 2010 and 2018. FEIs, despite being self-governing, rely on government funding for the majority of their income through various government funding streams, most notably the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Once the LSC was disbanded the funding came directly from the government via the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and from 2017 the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and other major state funders, such as, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), and later the Office for Students (OfS). These funds are used to offer courses either free at the point of delivery or more recently at reduced rates to students, as core funding is reduced and topped up by fees, facilitated by a student loan. Funding from government is often used as a 'policy lever' (Spours et al., 2008) which means government initiatives are implemented by using a funding methodology to ensure compliance. This usually means colleges lose funding for students who leave their course or fail to achieve their qualification.

Changes in government GFE funding methodologies, particularly since 2010 have affected attitudes to the retention of students. Student decisions to leave became a fight for funding survival and they were reframed as 'non-continuing students'. This helped to ensure non-retention was perceived as less acceptable by staff counselling students through their decision making and meant students who wanted to leave needed to be much firmer with tutors about their decision to do so. The pressure felt by students to stay and achieve, ironically, was likely to be acting as a stressor on their resilience (Esquivel et al., 2011). In this financial climate, it may be true to say that when a student chose to leave

their course for either personal or institutional reasons this may also be influenced by college financial accountings. The effects of reduced funding, marketisation, and how far they may impact on the student experience may be a factor in student drop out. This will be an element of the examination of government policies within the research.

1.3 The research questions

Around 8 per cent of HE students in low participation areas, such as Northsall College, leave their programme of study and in some cases the reasons recorded are vague and do not seem to fully explain why the students left (SMF, 2016). For some HE in FE student withdrawals, the reason is understandable and external to Northsall. This includes situations such as: severe and chronic illness, moving away, or a change in career direction. Pregnancy is also an understandable reason for leaving, as are acute mental health difficulties and bereavement, although not every student will leave in these circumstances (Kitzrow, 2003). Beyond these, every tutor will be able to talk about students who just seemed to 'disappear'. Perhaps their attendance waned significantly for a while and that is often the only indication of difficulty (Porter, 2008; O'Donnell, 2009).

Curiosity over the possible reasons for these students leaving their degree level courses led to consideration about the gap between level 3 and 4 studies. Most students were successful at level 3 and more motivated to pursue learning at level 4, so, in trying to understand drop out: - the initial research question was:

'What is the nature of transition between level 3 and level 4 in a general further education college?'

However, this evolved during the pilot to focus on listening to former student participants in the study and the emerging importance of resilience in retention, which, led to the title of the study:

'An investigation into the significance of resilience in retention on Higher Education courses in a Further Education college'

From this, the research questions (RQs) were developed:

- 1: *'What reasons do students give for leaving their course before completion?'*
- 2: *'How important is resilience to student retention at HE level?'*
- 3: *'What are the implications for FEIs and practitioners of effectively supporting Higher Education in Further Education students to complete their degree level studies?'*

The next stage in the research process was to undertake a literature review to explore contributions from writers and researchers around the concept of resilience and the reasons why HE in FE students leave their studies. Existing literature and research about the reasons for adult student drop out from post compulsory education has predominantly focussed on Higher Education as it is delivered within HEIs or Further Education, delivered in FEIs. Therefore, this review is drawn from three possible areas of literature and research: HE within HEIs, HE in FE and FE within Further Education Institutions, rather than from HE in FE exclusively.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The next stage in the research is to consider what other writers have uncovered about the reasons why HE in FE students are not retained on their programmes.

2.1 Search Criteria

The literature was chosen from multiple key word searches across resources accessed via Shibboleth, Open Athens, ERIC and Emerald. The approach taken was a hierarchy of searches. This meant starting with the generation of themes which related to the three research questions, 'Higher Education in Further Education', 'Resilience and Education' 'Higher Education and Retention', 'Further education and attrition' and 'Higher Education Teaching and Learning'. Initial reading of research articles and books from these data base searches generated sub themes, such as 'Attendance', 'Information and Guidance (IAG)', 'Marketisation' and 'Widening Participation' which could then be taken further in subsequent searches to assess their significance and prevalence in past research via the quantity of results returned. The web-based resource 'Journal TOCs' was also used to update the review with newly published research.

The reading of the source materials, identifying reasons for student attrition, led to the selection of the three overarching themes which impact on the retention of HE in FE students. The review will start by addressing the second Research Question: '*How important is resilience to student retention at HE level?*'. This factor concerns issues which may impact the individual resilience of the student and seemed to underpin the other factors, which is why it is the first to be considered. Lack of resilience seems important in explaining why some students are retained and others may leave when facing similar

circumstances and difficulties (Thomas and Hanson, 2014). The review continues by addressing the first Research Question: *‘What reasons do students give for leaving their course before completion?’* in those factors which are institutional and located within FEIs which can impact on a HE student’s resilience and retention on their learning journey in an FE college. The third factor is how governmental policy, external to the college, can impact on student resilience and retention. Each of these will now be considered in turn with reference to their relevance to resilience and retention for HE in FE students.

2.2 Individual resilience and retention

This section concerns those issues which may precipitate a student leaving their HE in FE study, but which are individual to them. This includes the impact of physical and mental health that may play an important role in personal student resilience (Hedberg and Tone, 2014; Gill, 2016). This led to the second Research Question: *‘How important is resilience to student retention at HE level?’*.

2.2.1 The contested nature of resilience

The word ‘resilience’ comes from the Latin ‘resilio’ meaning to bounce back (Robertson, 2012). There is a research interest in its application across the educational lifespan, from Primary schools to Higher Education (Troy and Mauss, 2011). Rutter (1985) originally analysed psychiatric disorder and postulated that the possession of resilience seemed to offer protection from the development of mental ill health. Resilience also appears to be dynamic, rather than a commodity, and involves a consideration of ‘*assets*’ against ‘*risk factors*’ (Brown et al., 2001:4).

Resilience was initially expressed in education as the observation that some children who may seem at risk of poor life and educational outcomes, due to adverse environments during their upbringing, actually adapt well to a variety of circumstances and thrive (Gu and Day, 2006). Resilience in adults can take a variety of forms, physical, social, intellectual and emotional. Resilience is the ability to withstand the setbacks in life, which have the potential to derail the plans and intentions of the individual (Gu and Day, 2006; Robertson, 2012). Allan et al. (2014) in their study of resilience in transition to Higher Education noted that resilience was more situated in what Bergmann et al. (2019:1) term, 'domains' of life, such as psychological, personal or academic functioning. The possession of good resilience in one or more domains, will be a protective factor for higher education students against any negative factors they may encounter during their study from sources, either outside or inside the college (Robertson, 2012).

Resilience is a problematic concept. There is a lack of clarity about what it means and how useful it is to explain individual differences in performance. It may be dangerous to say that students drop out of their HE in FE study due to poor resilience. This is because as Garrett (2015) suggested, it can perpetuate existing societal divisions because of different levels of power. Working class students may simply be lacking resilience because they do not conform to expectations of middle class dominated, HE environments (Garrett, 2015).

Garrett (ibid) also suggests that resilience serves the current political neoliberal agenda by pushing individuals beyond reasonable personal boundaries into levels of stress that may be harmful to them, but also ensure they are working at a level that serves dominant groups in society. This means the suggestion of poor resilience has the potential to be accusatory. Government and FE managers may actually be engaging in victim blaming

when they portray, particularly WP students, as having poor resilience. What WP students may actually be experiencing is disadvantage and disempowerment within the marketised HE in FE education system. They are expected to be able to be discerning consumers, but the reality is that their choice is often constrained by existing social inequalities which mean that the reality is that their market position remains largely the same as it was prior to marketisation (Callender and Dougherty, 2018). Disadvantage can be tied to lack of understanding, knowledge and experience within many families and communities about how to navigate the systems and procedures necessary to study at HE level (Almeida et al., 2016). This is because of the intergenerational perception that HE, in particular, is for other people, and may also be linked to no familial history of participation (Gayle et al., 2002).

Within the literature, the tendency is to adopt a more neutral approach to the concept of resilience as useful in understanding the forces inherent within an individual's life which manifest themselves as personal resilience. These will now be examined. It is important to remember that many of these dependencies may be impacted on by the wider college and society around the nature of the concept and as such, represent a partial understanding of resilience, but do not necessarily address the entire picture.

2.2.2 The possible role of resilience in retention

HE in FE students would seem to be at risk of dropping out of their degree programme when their ability to thrive and overcome difficulties they encounter, both in their learning journey and in their personal lives, overwhelms their resilience, that is, their personal ability to overcome these difficulties (Brown et al., 2001). Exploration of a student's

background and resilience is complex because there are many factors to take into consideration. These can include unanticipated events that occur in either the student's personal life or at college which can impact upon their overall resilience. For example, a student with good pre-existing resilience, who has favourable environmental conditions, that is they do not encounter any difficulties either at home or in the college for the duration of their studies, are likely to be retained on the course and complete their studies. Conversely, a student with poor resilience at the start of the course who encounters further difficulties, or an exacerbation of existing difficulties, either at home or in the course of their learning journey within the college will be at the highest risk of leaving as expressed in figure 1 below:

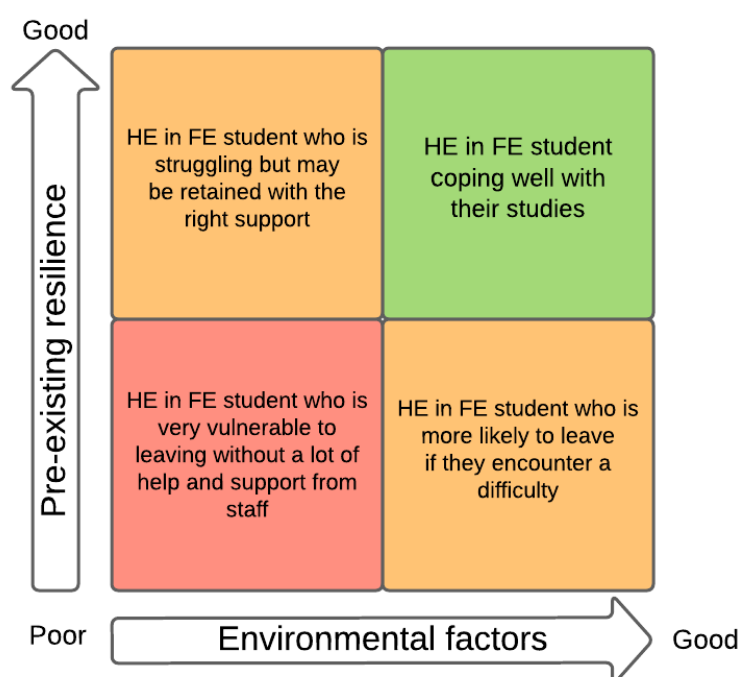


Figure 1: Factors affecting student resilience.

Figure 1 is adapted from the model suggested by Chess and Thomas (1984) for children's development and has been adapted to demonstrate how students may be on a continuum from poor to high pre-existing resilience, that is, having good personal resilience before starting their college course. The intersecting dimensions are favourable and unfavourable environmental conditions. Rutter (1985) suggested that whilst anyone had the capacity to develop resilience, this changed and fluctuated over time and in different life circumstances. This means that what could be survived today, may tip the balance scale into failing at a later date. In Figure 1 this would mean moving from the green to an amber or the red square. Luthar (in VicHealth, 2015) outlined that Rutter believed that resilience itself, like many psychological, physical and intellectual traits, is influenced by innate characteristics and personality. If Luthar is correct, colleges may only have a limited ability to influence resilience and the development of resilience in their HE students. However, since the precise influence of inheritance and environment on resilience is unknown, improvement could be significant from better understanding of environmental factors, such as the impact of marketisation and college processes on a student's ability to complete a HE course.

Consideration of other factors that affect resilience ability may also be desirable. Gender differences, for example, could impact on HE in FE students' retention. Allan et al. (2014) found that the relationship between resilience and maximising academic attainment could be influenced by traditional gender role expectations which would suggest greater resilience in males. This means that males may hide their difficulties and find it harder to accept help from others, including college counsellors. This façade can lead to social isolation, which could be a risk factor for poor resilience (Thomas and Hanson, 2014).

Female students are more likely to take advantage of social support to bolster themselves against stress and maintain their self-esteem, which may be an enabler and help to ensure their achievement on HE programmes (Allan et al., 2014).

Possessing good resilience may be important in transitioning to HE in FE study from lower-level entry courses. Allan et al. (2014) found that resilience manifested itself in study behaviours, such as resourcefulness, emotional intelligence and, like Thomas and Hanson (2014), also emphasised the importance of sociability to mitigate any stress from their transition to HE level study. The corollary to this is that HE institutions, whether HEIs or FEIs, should be at least meeting students halfway by attempting to ameliorate their transition stress whenever possible (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). This may be difficult to achieve in institutions that are suffering the effects of the post 2010 'austerity' funding regimes (Tomlinson, 2014).

Many factors can influence the student's ability to be resilient and act like weights on a balance, a metaphor that has informed this research. Negative factors which could push the scales could include gender, and general lack of resourcefulness in being able to transition to study at HE level (Thomas and Hanson, 2014; Allan et al, 2014). Factors which mitigate these issues and may bolster resilience and tip the scales positively include social integration with student peers, and effective transition strategies within HE institutions (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009).

The research is situated uncomfortably between the usefulness of the concept of resilience as a way to understand why HE in FE students leave their courses, and concerns such as those raised by Garrett (2015) and Canavan (2007) about using resilience as an excuse to unnaturally extend the effort and energies of individuals. A way through this could be to utilise the concept and its underpinning research as potentially positive to student retention but also to address the possible detriment to students which may result from an unqualified application of the concept.

Neoliberalism, as a concept of de-regulated markets with little or no state involvement, requires individuals to be well informed and self-interested consumers. Capitalism cannot be effectively operate without this. However, widening participation and part time WP students in particular are often disempowered and uninformed (Le Grand et al., 2008). A way to address this may be to increase the information offered to students as consumers in a neoliberal marketised system. This would enable them both as individuals and as consumers to be co-creators of the definition of the concept, both on an individual and at an institutional or even national level. This is the position which the research will attempt to take in order to deal in as balanced a way as possible with the concept of resilience.

Mental ill health amongst HE students is of increasing concern to all educational institutions, according to the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (2016), and the importance of this to resilience will now be considered.

2.2.3 Mental health and the myth of poor resilience

This section considers how mental ill health can impact on the HE in FE student's learning journey. This is because it can adversely affect the balance of issues in different domains of life (Bergmann et al. 2019). This can reduce the ability to be resilient and self-manage which are, arguably, key to educational success (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

FElS have recently indicated increases in student's self-reported mental ill health across the range of provision (AoC, in The Government's Green Paper, 2018). The Government Green Paper: Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision (2018) found that most mental health disorders begin in adolescence and it may be that they are more effectively treated at this developmental stage (Patel. et al., 2007). Increasing levels of mental ill health amongst degree students could mean that at any point an exacerbation of concurrent issues could lead to a student dropping out of their learning (Hedberg and Tone, 2014; Aronin, 2016). By contrast, Baxter (2014:506) suggested that categories of disorder between 1990 and 2010 do not support the idea that the prevalence of such illnesses is rising. It may be that reporting, and awareness of mental disorder is what has increased. It also seems likely that the increase in student numbers since the 1960s when one in twenty young people were going to university compared to a rate approaching fifty per cent today, has resulted in a proportional rise in mental ill health (Vailes, 2017).

However, over and above increased participation in Higher Education, and more recently than Baxter (2014), The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey reported an increase between 2007 and 2014 of 14 types of non-psychotic common mental health problems from 25 per cent to 39 per cent across the UK population (APMS, 2016). This rise is reflected among children and young people (Young Minds, 2017; The Government Green Paper, 2018). This

means ensuring appropriate identification, interventions and support within educational settings, including Further Education colleges (Eisenburg and Hunt, 2009).

Mental health differences between individuals could be due to biological risk factors and a demonstrable link between lower socioeconomic groups and increased risk of mental ill health. This link, according to Murphy and Fonagy (2012), can be both a cause and consequence of poverty (The Chief Medical Officer's report 2012; The Mental Health Foundation (MHF), 2016). This suggests that mental ill health may also be a factor in WP student drop out from HE in FE because poor mental health correlates with low socio-economic status and the ability to be a discerning and informed consumer (MHF, 2016).

A HE in FE student's resilience could be stretched by mental ill health. However, evidence from comparisons with the general population at the same age does not support this analysis (Blanco et al., 2008; Binnie, 2017). The opposite may also be the case. The focus and commitment required in, HE study has a benefit to health for students over their lifespan, including benefits of lifelong learning on mental health outcomes (Swain and Hammond, 2011). Swain and Hammond (2011) suggested wide ranging benefits of study, including reducing obesity and depression. From research on a longitudinal cohort using regression analysis involving 145 adults from diverse backgrounds and learning experiences, positive psychosocial outcomes included improved efficacy, hope and purpose in life, which support improved mental health and societal integration more generally (Swain and Hammond, 2011). HEFCE (2017) suggests that graduates have lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of wellbeing than non-graduates in the general

population. A conclusion could be that for some individuals, attending HE programmes may mitigate the risk posed by poor resilience, by providing life focus and the pursuit of a goal even in the face of a potential barrier such as mental ill health (Scoffham and Barnes, 2011; Binnie, 2017).

The effort and potential stress inherent in both securing a place on a degree programme and staying and achieving the qualification cannot be underestimated. One major unanticipated event on top of this commitment, such as a relationship breakdown, or even marketisation by FEIs not meeting student expectations, can provide a significant adverse stressor to mental health (Blanco et al., 2008; Douglas et al., 2015). However, this kind of unusual occurrence also has the potential to derail the HE study of those without pre-existing mental ill health as well as those who do; it all depends on the resilience of the individual concerned. The addition of mental health as a stressor may mean the individual is likely to be more susceptible to additional, unforeseen, difficulties such as bereavement or unexpected pregnancy (Hedberg and Tone, 2014). Although strength can be built through appropriate challenge, a background of mental ill health can increase or mitigate the effects of degree level study as a stressor (Neil and Dias, 2001; Binnie, 2017).

In summary, levels of mental health difficulty amongst young people are a growing concern to educational professionals and policy makers (Vailes, 2017). They could be identified and addressed in the education system, because mental health problems often manifest themselves in adolescence (Eisenburg and Hunt, 2009). This presumes that there is funding available for GFE colleges to offer the specialist support this group of learners

requires, but following more restrictive funding methodology post 2010, this seems less likely (McGettigan, 2013).

The last individual factor affecting HE in FE students to be considered in this section is the impact that physical ill health can have on the resilience of this cohort of students and therefore their ability to complete their programme of study.

2.2.4 Physical ill health: a hidden cause of student drop out

If a student experiences serious personal or familial physical ill health, this could mean they withdraw from their degree level study. There seems little written about the impact on a student's likelihood of leaving any post 16 course as a result of their own or familial poor health. This gap in current research on physical ill health can put a stressor in one of the domains of a student's life and derail their ability to stay and achieve on their HE in FE programme (Hedberg and Tone, 2014; Bergmann et al. 2019).

An individual's health can be viewed holistically with physical wellbeing impacting on emotional and psychological wellbeing (Rose, 2017). Much of the literature regarding students and physical ill health seems to focus on supporting the overall wellbeing of students and how physical activity can improve mental health (Theodoratou et al., 2016).

The recent expansion of higher education may have improved student 'wellbeing' through successful academic achievement for many students. However, it is the minority who leave their courses and apparently do not benefit from this positive effect of HE that is the concern of this research (Prichard and Wilson, 2003; Rose, 2017).

In summary, potential student resilience can set up a chain of events along a student's learning journey in FEIs in either a positive or negative way, to either facilitate staying and achieving or leaving and failing (Rutter, 2012). Resilience is a contested concept that may be legitimising pressure on students to stay and achieve beyond their ability or desire to do so (Garrett, 2015).

In response to the first Research Question, *'What reasons do students give for leaving their course before completion?'*, the review will now examine the literature related to those factors influencing student drop out which are located within FEIs.

2.3 Institutional factors which may influence HE student resilience and retention

The second overarching factor which challenges students' resilience in their Higher Education study is to do with institutional factors within FEIs. Once a prospective student has made the decision to enrol on an HE programme of study, there are many factors within the college that may cause difficulty on their subsequent learning journey (Prichard and Wilson, 2003). These factors include partial or inappropriate information, advice and guidance (IAG) (Bowl, 2001; Willetts, 2017); ineffective teaching and learning pedagogy; unsupportive wider college culture; - the impact of attendance policies on WP learners (Paisey and Paisey, 2003; Cohen et al., 2011).

The approach taken by this section of the literature review is to consider each new factor the student is likely to encounter in the college and whether it could have the potential to stress the student's resilience and be a risk factor for withdrawal. However, this will

depend on how the student experiences the identified factors, and how FE colleges may respond if there is difficulty (Kuh et al., 2011; Binnie, 2017). The ability of FE colleges to respond to student demand or difficulty is likely to be mediated by marketisation policies and funding constraints which can limit the resources they have to effectively support students (Smith, 2015).

2.3.1 Information, advice, and guidance (IAG)

The first step on a student's learning journey from further to higher education is to make the decision to study at degree level. Information, advice and guidance could come from a variety of sources, both external and internal to FEIs, from careers officers, tutors, family and friends. Students may also simply follow an internal progression route from further education courses at level 3 within an FE college (Gill, 2016). They could also apply from another college, having gained relevant qualifications, known as external progression. Some prospective HE in FE students make a poor course choice and drop out because the course they want to study is not available and they accept another, which is unsuitable. It could be that they do not have enough time to decide before the course starts or they make a subjective decision based on how they feel about a particular programme or college (Bowl, 2001).

Good pre-entry guidance for any student considering a new course of study is important and should be a national concern to policy makers. Poor guidance is a reason for the under representation of lower socioeconomic groups within degree level courses (Watt and Paterson, 2010). However, recent caseload volumes and the changes made to the role of careers adviser to focus on performativity in terms of the focus on pre-set targets has

limited their ability to support WP students as much as they would wish (Christie, 2015).

IAG can also vary in quality from one institution to another. In spite of a national standard being in place, not all institutions receive that recognition (Matrix, 2021). Funding pressures which FE colleges can experience often mean the resources dedicated to IAG are sparse.

It is very common for students who have previously studied in Further Education at level three to internally progress to HE studies within the same institution. Its popularity is due to both familiarity with the institution and advice provided by a tutor they already know, who can encourage them to broaden their career horizons by continuing their studies (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). Many tutors perceive their role in IAG as interviewing students in order to assess their suitability to join a particular course of study. Their concern is not necessarily to improve the aspirations of WP students. Internal progression can also mean that retention is improved because the student is able to transition more easily within the same institution, which is less daunting for WP students who value familiarity (McGivney, 1996; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). However, the assumption, by the student, that the same tutor or one with a similar approach will be teaching them, or that the course will be delivered in a similar way, may not be realised because of timetabling pressure, staffing and subject priorities; this might mean they get frustrated and leave.

Advice from tutors and staff employed by HE institutions can be due to pressure to recruit and lack of knowledge about what effective and impartial IAG may look like, which creates a bias towards their own programmes (Willetts, 2017). There is a danger that if IAG is

based within FE colleges, the advice students receive may not be impartial but linked to courses currently offered by the college and undersubscribed (Willetts, 2017). The tutor advising often has limited motivation to suggest an alternative course to a prospective student (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; DfES, 2006). Bowl (2001) agrees with many of Willetts' (2017) assertions about lack of tutor objectivity in offering course advice and her research is persuasive, based on the experiences of 32 non-traditional (or widening participant) students.

Poor course decision making could be a result of early closure on a decision about which degree courses a student would like to study (Krieshok, 1998). Kidd and Wardman (1999), argue that staff must also try to challenge students, so they are not making decisions based on the opinions of either staff, or others in their lives (Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1990; Krieshok, 1998). Hodkinson and Sparkes (1993) suggest that effective decision making would be better supported if students had more time between the end of one course and the start of another. Krieshok (ibid) suggests that effective student decision making could be supported by the provision of a chance to change courses. However, students are often constrained by the existing conventions of course structure, because of current government funding methodologies (Sperlinger et al., 2018). There are also likely to be institutional objections to course-changing, based on the need to plan resourcing (Kidd and Wardman, 1999). Funding constraints since 2010 particularly, mean that margins of viability for an FE course are so slight that speculative courses which may not recruit or where numbers are uncertain would not be offered. Although longitudinal studies of student satisfaction with course choices made recently are not available, there is some

evidence to suggest that HE in FE students can end up with qualifications which do not seem to underpin their career progression (Lloyd and Griffiths, 2008).

To summarise, ineffective, missing, or biased IAG influenced by marketisation and the necessity to recruit students, or confidence in the familiarity of the tutor offering advice, can mean that students enrol on a programme of study not suited to their needs, which make them less likely to continue (Bowl, 2001). The student may not have enough time to decide before the start of the course, or the programme the student wants to take is not available (Krieshok, 1998; Willetts, 2017). Colleges have said that students on the wrong course are likely to experience stress and disengagement which negatively affects their resilience and continuation (Watt and Paterson, 2010).

Following IAG and enrolment on the right course, the next stage on a student's learning journey concerns the start of teaching. The significance of these experiences to student resilience and how they may have been impacted by marketisation will now be explored in the following sections of the review.

2.3.2 Teaching adult learners

There is some evidence that failing to form an effective learning relationship with their tutor or peers, or if a student feels a tutor is unreceptive or even hostile to forming an effective relationship with them, can mean they lose access to an important source of support during their studies (Gill, 2016). An ineffective pedagogy, which does not value an adult student's life experience can also put pressure on student resilience, leading to drop out (Gill, 2016). Academic interest in the way adults learn has been fuelled most recently

by the marketisation of FE in HE since 1997, which will be discussed more fully in the final section of the review (Bynner, 2016).

Assumptions about adult learning have focussed on making up for what was not achieved earlier in a student's educational career, whether at school or college (The Foster Report, 2005). Knowles' (1980) original theory of adult learning, 'andragogy', is based on what he perceived made it possible for adults, as opposed to children, to learn. It is comprised of a proposed set of attributes that adult learners possess. McGrath (2009) suggests these attributes assume that adults are an amorphous group, rather than individuals. Other critics of these assumptions include Merriam (2001) who argues that there are overlaps between andragogy and pedagogy because there is no certainty about what constitutes an adult learner in terms of age or other characteristics (Rogers and Horrocks, 2010).

Knowles' distinction between pedagogy and andragogy seems to be more about confusing good and bad teaching methods with specific life stages. This difference in approaches to teaching and learning may be spurious since both children and adults have experience and values that influence their learning (Taylor and Kroth, 2009).

For adult HE in FE students, Illeris (2017) suggests that an effective adult pedagogy takes account of the situation in which learning takes place and sees the interaction which brings about that learning as being as important as the content itself. Illeris also suggested like Rogers (2002) earlier, that successful teaching of adults involves linking current learning to validated past experiences of life, work and education, to make it meaningful. Adults' perceptions of whether they can learn are governed by measuring current learning against

experience, to see if it fits, because otherwise it can limit what Rogers (2002:79) terms their 'self-horizons'.

Limiting 'self-horizons' may mean that if an adult student has a previous experience of education that is negative, then as McGivney (1993) suggested, they may be reluctant to try again by taking another course because they believe they will not be capable of completing it. This may in turn affect an individual's 'self-efficacy', which Bandura (1994) defined as an individual's belief in their ability to achieve. The concepts of self-efficacy and resilience seem similar as both depend upon the personal ability to either overcome challenge or succumb to adversity (Brown et al., 2001).

Adult learning is often conflated with vocational education, certainly in terms of Government development of policy (BIS, 2015). This is due in part because the impetus for adults to return to education often comes from their need to find, maintain or advance their employment opportunities through further training or qualifications (Derrick et al., 2010). Whilst younger learners may be more inclined to focus on their career and education as a motivator, adults are already immersed in the concerns of adulthood, such as employment and family responsibilities (Gill, 2016). They may also have a general awareness of the challenges and opportunities life can offer, which can often motivate them to return to formal learning (Rogers, 2002; Derrick et al., 2010). Subject choice may also be important to facilitate career change or broaden their own interests and confidence, even if employment is the eventual career goal (Waller, 2006).

To sum up, effective adult learning and teaching must be relevant to the students' aspirations and interests and teaching and learning must be seen as a partnership between tutor and learner, where the experiences of the student can be drawn into the teaching process because it draws upon their life experiences (Illeris, 2017). When this does not happen, students may get frustrated, become disengaged from their learning and leave.

The exploration of motivations for learning in higher education has an interesting link with the marketisation of HE. In NIACE participation studies spanning more than ten years, adults in employment consistently reported being more likely to participate in adult learning than those outside of employment (NIACE, 2010; Derrick et al., 2010). This may suggest that the more recent HE student focus on education as a 'commodity' and a means to better employment and a better life, capture the imagination of those who adopt the neoliberal ethos of individual self-improvement (Molesworth et al., 2010; Nixon et al., 2018). However, it could also be about confidence, aspiration, and information via an employer or their workplace. The last section in the review looks at what the literature says about the possible mismatch between teaching and the expectations of students who see themselves as consumers; as well as the recent changes to funding part time courses, which have reduced the numbers of these learners by 53 per cent since 2008 (UK Parliament, House of Commons, 2020)

The other important relationship that could be a protective factor and help support student resilience is fellow students.

2.3.3 Relationships between students

Contact with academic peers on HE programmes usually develops into social support and is important to student success. This is because it is linked to attributes such as problem solving and improved self-efficacy, as well as healthy self-esteem (Ikiz and Cakar, 2010; Onyishi and Ogbodo, 2012). Lack of it is linked to possible depression and anxiety (Taylor, 2011). It is particularly important for younger adult students engaging in HE study to establish friendship groups. Christiansen and Bell (2010) found that peer support enabled students to cope more effectively with learning challenges and it reduced attrition. Paechter et al. (2010) further suggested peer-supported learning could also be linked to achievement.

Peer learning has increased in HE level study, partly as a response to financial pressures on university funding. It is also a way for students to take greater responsibility for their own learning and to support fellow students through '*reciprocal learning*' (Bourd et al., 2001:2). Social support from fellow students is an important part of the HE in FE student's educational experiences (Christiansen and Bell, 2010). Lack of it can mean the student is not integrated into an institution and can lose an important source of support when they experience difficulties and could make a difference to whether they can be resilient in the face of any other difficulties (Gu and Day, 2006; Ford et al., 2015).

Once a student seems to be on the right course, and making learning relationships with staff and students, they can sometimes find that the impact of the wider college environment still has the potential to derail their learning experiences.

2.3.4 The wider college environment

The wider college environment can influence student retention, especially if not experienced as positive and supportive by the student (Kuh et al., 2011). This environment includes student support, administration and services such as ICT, libraries, catering or cleaning. The significance of these support service networks is often in the relationships formed, so the student feels part of the wider college (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005). ICT is especially important to ensure students can be effective in using the virtual learning environment (VLE) facilities that are vital for course resources and submission of assignments. The learning environment needs to be experienced by students as supportive of all their course-related needs (Kuh et al., 2011). The way to achieve this is by having as small a gap as possible between what the institution says it will do, and what it actually does. This can be difficult to achieve if funding is stretched and college managers perceive priorities to be elsewhere (Tomlinson, 2014).

Students who do not feel integrated into the college, nor able to ask for help from wider college services may drop out of their studies (Kuh et al., 2005; Jephcote et al., 2008). However, since increased marketisation, particularly after 2010, tutors may lack any real power to influence managers to direct resources. Such resources to fix students' problems are scarcer and often focused on measures to ensure compliance with Government targets, such as recruitment, attendance and reporting on retention, rather than on improving the student experience (Unwin in Derrick et al., 2010). This can create a problematic feedback loop for tutors who realise the importance of the support their relationship can provide for students, particularly those whose resilience is stretched, but

cannot extend their influence far enough to ensure their student receives what they need from wider college services.

Students who are dissatisfied with their college experience can feel overwhelmed and their overall resilience may be challenged. Often the first sign of student disengagement is declining or lack of attendance (Porter, 2008). This important indicator of failing resilience is examined next.

2.3.5 Attendance, widening participation students and resilience

The student's learning journey up to this point entails selecting a course and enrolling, meeting their tutors and fellow students and negotiating any difficulties with wider college services. If they experience one or more of these factors negatively, then the first sign of any dissatisfaction can be poor attendance (Porter, 2008; O'Donnell, 2009). This can impact on the student's ability to learn and achieve on their programme of study. Because of rising student numbers, the attendance expectations of HE in FE study may place additional pressure on adult and WP cohort students (Brehoney and Deem, 2005).

Attendance can be both a symptom and a cause of drop out. Poor attendance can lead to a spiral of difficulty that will increasingly impact on student resilience as they miss content that would underpin future study. They give up because the work and effort required to 'catch up' feels too great. On the other hand, poor attendance can be a '*disengagement strategy*' and can often lead to declining commitment to the course and to withdrawal (O'Donnell, 2009:753). The reason for a student's poor attendance may be the same as the one that eventually precipitates withdrawal. Although this may not always be the case,

attendance issues are often a kind of ‘fanfare’ for the severity of the issue to come (O’Donnell, 2009). It could be the case that some students experience a personality dissonance between their own attendance behaviour and the expectation of study at degree level. Conscientiousness is suggestive of good attendance, whereas students with neurotic and argumentative dispositions are less likely to attend well (Lounsbury et al., 2004). This leaves FEIs in the position of needing more information to enable targeted assistance for students who appear to be at greater risk of poor attendance. However, assessing their personality type to establish that risk may well be problematic, intrusive and could raise ethical concerns.

The justification given to students for good attendance is because it is an employer expectation (Roebathan, 2015). The reality is that only a minority of conscientious students manage attendance and many still do well on their courses (Paisey and Paisey, 2003). The expectation of many colleges, expressed in published material, is that student attendance on degree programmes should be 100 per cent. Although HE provision is monitored by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) one of the peculiarities of HE in FE is that the HE provision tends to be subject to the same quality processes which govern FE, usually derived from Ofsted, who expect ‘*a strong focus on attendance*’ for adult learners (Ofsted, 2019:50). This is probably because good attendance tends to correspond with achievement (Colby, 2004; Newman-Ford et al., 2008). This policy is likely to be disadvantage the, often part time, adult students studying HE in FE because family and employment commitments may limit their attendance (Burd and Hodgson, 2006). Sperlinger et al. (2018) argues that college attendance policies need to

adapt to the requirements of adult students who need more flexibility in their learning. Older students sometimes believe they can make up for missed lectures, but they can overestimate their ability to do this (Colby, 2004). Superficial engagement with the course can mask genuine issues of vulnerability to drop out (Burd and Hodgson, 2006).

Prediction tools, such as McClukie's (2014) have suggested it is possible to determine the likelihood of students withdrawing. His suggestion is that 75 per cent attendance is a predictor of withdrawal and 75-85 per cent attendance is the optimum intervention point. It is an interesting proposition but contrasts with Colby's (2004) '70 per cent rule' which suggests a two in three chance of failing and a four in five chance of not getting a first or upper second-class degree. These tools may be applicable across institutions, but further research in HE in FE would be needed, particularly because there seems to be no definitive agreement regarding the level at which poor attendance would trigger concern. Consistently declining attendance or complete absence is a much more significant indicator of student dissatisfaction and therefore a retention risk (Porter, 2008; O'Donnell, 2009).

It could be postulated that by the time a student reaches the point of being noticeable as vulnerable through poor attendance, it may be too late to prevent their withdrawal. A better approach may be to maintain regular and positive contact between the student and the FEI throughout (Rovai, 2002). This could be via a '*motivational messaging system*' (Visser, 1998:2). Originally developed by Visser for distance learning, it could be transferable to HE in FE students by using text messaging systems, which are often already used for marketing and could be extended to be more proactive rather than reactive (Park

et al., 2011). The most successful intervention strategies are often those which focus on a whole college approach, which includes all teaching and support staff, and the requirement that they need to be directly supportive of the student experience (Park et al., 2011).

In conclusion, assessing the significance of attendance as an indicator of student withdrawal from HE in FE study is problematic. The use of attendance levels per se as a reliable indicator of student engagement with their course is unreliable. Widening participation students may have good reasons for erratic or poor attendance including employment and home responsibilities (Paisey and Paisey, 2003; Burd and Hodgson, 2006). It may be that notice should be taken when there is a change in attendance pattern, a decline from erratic attendance or increasing absence in a usually regularly attending student. This seems a more reliable indicator of possible drop out (Porter, 2008; O'Donnell, 2009).

To summarise this section: to complete a successful learning journey, students must negotiate IAG (Watt and Paterson, 2010). Then teaching and learning strategies are needed which match their expectations and build upon their previous educational experiences (Illeris, 2017). Positive relationships with student peers and support from the wider college environment in times of difficulty are key to ensuring that students stay on their course (Kuh et al., 2011; Ford et al., 2015). Poor attendance should be taken as both an indicator of student vulnerability and a possible cause of student drop out, if it is persistent (O'Donnell, 2009). This success must be achieved against a backdrop of reduced funding which can disempower staff and wider college services who are experiencing

stress to their ability to cope and be resilient, due to lack of time and administrative expectations which staff report have also increased since 2010 (Gleeson, 2005; Tomlinson, 2014).

Government policy, marketisation and how it impacts on widening participation cohorts, such as those at Northsall College, will be explored in this last section. It concerns those factors which are external to FEIs, but which can also impact student resilience through their HE in FE experiences.

2.4 The policy context and external factors which may influence resilience and retention

This section of the review will examine the third overarching factor, which can be important to student retention for HE in FE students. It concerns recent governmental policies and the way in which neoliberalism and marketisation has changed the experience of HE students through loans and contributions to fees (Tomlinson, 2014). This has fundamentally impacted on the relationship between tutor and student. Students increasingly view themselves as consumers of degrees as a product, rather than valuing learning and independent study which was formerly fundamental to HE (Maringe, 2006). Despite government commitment to WP agendas, non-traditional learners seem to have fared poorly as, being part-time learners who now experience fewer available courses (Sperlinger et al., 2018). This has happened against a backdrop of greater auditability in HE, following the beginning of the coalition Government policy of 'austerity' in 2010 (Hodgson, 2015).

This section will start with an overview of the background to a neoliberal approach to HE funding and how that has affected widening participation in Higher Education in the UK over the years since The Robbins Report (1963), which was the beginning of Governmental concern about the lack of diversity amongst those students who entered HE in the UK.

2.4.1 A neoliberal agenda and non-compulsory education

All social administration, including that of education, takes place within a framework of the current political landscape within the country in which it is located. In the UK, by the 1970s, the soaring cost of social welfare programmes, introduced post war, coupled with a world recession, led to Margaret Thatcher's re-interpretation of the political meta narrative of collectivism that had dominated since the second world war. The oil crisis-induced world recession brought into doubt the post war consensus that the ruling government should manage the economy to maintain employment. Providing interventions, such as education, - to improve life for individuals, free at the point of delivery, was no longer taken for granted (George and Miller, 2013). From the doubt which developed in the 1970s about the efficacy of a collectivist approach in a time of economic crisis, Thatcher forged the 'new right' which effectively meant 'a small government' approach and included more limited public spending on social welfare, including education (Armingeon and Bonoli, 2006). This neoliberalism offered a way to curb public spending by overturning the collectivist consensus and appealed to the individualist tendencies among the majority of voters who supported the 'new right' approach, advocating that people could forge their own destinies through individual enterprise, endeavour and financial reward.

Since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which made colleges into incorporated institutions, there have been a variety of funding streams within an individual college (Dhillon et al., 2008). The most important is 'core funding' via the government agencies such as the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The name has changed several times and since 2017, the FEFC is now the Education and Skills Funding Agency, and part of the Department for Education (DfE). Incorporation created centralised government control, but it also created quasi markets, which meant colleges became target-driven and in competition with nearby education providers. Colleges and other education and training providers, now directly funded by government, are part of the civil service structure and are answerable, ultimately to the secretary of state. Short- or long-term funding incentives or disincentives initiate changes to practice within FEIs (Gleeson, 2005). For HE, the main funding is from The ESFA or HEFCE, later the Office for Students (OfS) who give instruction to higher education and further education providers (Hill and Irving, 2009). In this study the term 'Government' refers to the funding agencies that have responsibility for FE and HE. To ensure FEIs are adequately funded, as calculated per capita and by programme; they need to enrol enough students (Smith, 2007b). As previously mentioned, the funding methodology ruled that students who leave the course before completion incur a penalty of 50 per cent less funding (GOV.UK, 2015, updated 2018).

Following the financial crash of 2008-9, the Coalition government formed in 2010 saw the solution to public spending, which had precipitated this difficulty, as a period of financial 'austerity'. The result was reduced funding, not least to FEIs, and an even greater accountability for the money which was allocated. In turn, neoliberalism became even more dominant, influenced by quasi-marketisation, and FE colleges hastened the

progression to business orientated cultures. The result of this is that monitoring of student retention became even more active by pastoral tutors and often led to persuading students that completing a course was in their best interests. This was an argument even more supported after 1998, by appealing to the student's commitment to pay for courses through a student loan. For some students, post compulsory education has never been exclusively about completing a course and achieving a qualification but rather about self-improvement. The assumption of the automatic pursuit of a qualification through education is an invention of an economically focussed government who want tangible outcomes for the resources they are providing (Hodgson, 2015).

2.4.2 Widening participation From Robbins to Dearing

The focus on widening participation (WP) has a long history. Concern over the lack of social diversity apparent in the student cohort entering higher education was beginning to be apparent by the 1950s. The UK's historic practice of competition for university places and restriction of entry; based on merit, fostered the notion of scholarship and elitism (Willetts, 2017). This legacy was in contrast to many other countries who based admittance on an entry standard, rather than on competition. The impetus for the expansion of higher education in the 1960s came from concerns that too few graduates could mean a shortage of skills and an inability to remain competitive in the international economic arena (Burke, 2012). At this time, as few as one in twenty of the UK population attended a higher education course (Vignoles and Murray, 2016). In 1963 the Robbins report recommended the expansion of HE from 8 per cent to 17 per cent by 1980 (Burke, 2012).

The central issue for Robbins, as it is for all who want to see an expansion of participation in higher education, is that it meant allowing diversity within HE to expand beyond people who meet the traditional entry criteria of the university. At this early stage of increasing participation, there was no suggestion of HEIs adapting their culture and environment to support *widening* participation (MacDonald and Stratta, 2001). Initial widening participation policies therefore meant diversification within competitive criteria that favoured middle class males into what Vignoles and Murray (2016) term, 'bright poor' and they were closely followed by, presumably, 'bright' women. The main barrier to what has been termed the 'massification' of higher education was financial (Donnelly and Evans, 2019). The solution, according to the Dearing Report in 1997, was for students to contribute to paying for their education, a policy seemingly juxtaposed with the notion of WP students as underprivileged in a variety of ways, not least, economically (Bennett, 2010). Dearing (Ibid) made specific recommendations that there should be allowance made for the poorest. Education as a collectivist responsibility is at odds with, HE in a quasi marketised system. Neoliberal assumptions of HE students as empowered consumers is incompatible with WP students who are often less empowered or informed within the market system (Le Grand et al., 2008).

This polarisation in UK HE plays out most visibly in the difference between Russell group and 'other' universities. There are differences in fee level with the 24 universities collectively known as the Russell group, which command the highest fees in the sector. They represent universities within the UK who regard themselves as having outstanding teaching and learning facilities, and links with industry. Although self-recruiting, the restricted entry is an indication of elite status (Younger et al., 2019). The financial

implications for any institutions successfully engaging WP cohorts could also cause a polarisation of applications to universities resulting in working-class students being less likely to choose Russell Group universities (Reay et al., 2001b). The Further and Higher Education Act in 1992 meant polytechnics became universities and these 'new' universities were more likely to attract WP students as they had a background in vocational courses which supported the expansion of progression to, HE. However, the Russell Group universities seem to have undermined this through elitism. Recent indications are that the inequalities which had originally led to the lower numbers of students participating in HE had merely seemed to transfer inequality to the types of universities attended (Younger et al., 2019).

Widening participation has its roots in social justice and equality, but the notion of an easily identified WP cohort is contestable. It is this confusion that will now be explored.

2.4.3 Does Widening Participation exist?

Research on student retention in post compulsory education still suggests students who drop out of study in the UK have a different WP profile to those who complete (McGivney, 1996; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). It may be that society and what leads up to individuals acquiring entry requirements, which is causing underrepresentation in higher education, rather than what is happening within HE institutions themselves (Gorard, 2007). Gorard (2007) questions whether WP really exists and argues that if it does, it may not be easy to identify. Gorard based his evidence for this on a statistical analysis of UK HE participation rates which, he argues, are difficult to evaluate authoritatively, due to incompatibility between data sets to make even a simple comparison between the

characteristics of individuals in HE and those in the general population. Ideas about what constitutes WP students are continuing to evolve. It has been suggested, for example, that ethnicity and gender were becoming as important as work position or social class as those described as WP (Gorard, 2007). Underrepresented groups could be lacking cultural capital and as narrowly defined as 'mainly white, working class males' (Smit, 2012). It may be more accurate to suggest that WP is more akin to a concept, rather than a narrowly defined group of clearly identifiable people. It might be reasonable to wonder why, despite the difficulties alluded to, the use of the term persisted and why it is still used by a variety of government agencies. This is possibly because it serves a useful purpose and offers a 'short-hand' descriptor of a complex concept. Widening participation 'initiatives' can deflect more fundamental questions about whether HE has much impact on social mobility or social equity. Whether widening participation exists or not in theory, or in policy rhetoric, what is clear is that; despite the amount of research into WP, there has actually been little movement in class mobility over the last fifty years (Lynch, 2006: Donnelly and Evans, 2019).

The term widening participation or variations of it to denote under-representation or poor inclusion, persists. It is used by a variety of governmental agencies such as UCAS (2017), Education and Skills Funding Agency and the Office for Students (OfS). It is also measured by The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) by using indices such as low participation areas (POLAR) and 'under representation by area' (TUNDRA) as well as the distribution of the disabled students' allowance and the numbers of students entering higher education from state schools (HESA, 2020). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) produces

performance indicators that denote how successful, or otherwise, a HE institution has been in attracting what they define as underrepresented or WP students.

For the purposes of this research, the most suitable working definition, carrying the caveat of doubt about the efficacy of the term, would seem to be that provided by the government briefing paper provided by Cornell-Smith and Hubble (2018). They suggest widening participation within higher education should focus on the following groups of potential, and currently under- represented learners:

...disadvantaged backgrounds, lower income households, care-leavers, mature students, disabled students and students from some ethnic groups...
(Cornell-Smith and Hubble, 2018:4)

Although it is important to note that any definition of WP is only one definition which, despite being from official sources and in current use, as Gorard (2007) suggested, may be situated upon the shifting sands of the way in which data is collected. Widening participation, as a concept of social justice, is likely to be impacted upon by the UK education system which, as the very existence of Russell Group universities demonstrates, is still a microcosm of society. Thus, the degree of equity which is or can be experienced by many within it who are disadvantaged in terms of cultural and social capital will be constrained (Bourdieu 1986; Smit, 2012). It is this possible cultural and social discord between home life and study which many WP students face in undertaking HE study that will now be examined.

2.4.4 Community, first generation HE and under representation in Higher Education

The characteristics of groups under-represented within the post compulsory education system, such as those who are first generation, higher education or continuing students can be significant to the widening of participation in HE (McGivney, 1996; Gayle et al., 2002). Widening participation students experience a legacy of social and economic barriers, all of which have been overcome for them to reach the point of starting their degree programme (Kennedy, 1997). Indeed, the high levels of achievement at FE colleges suggest that these obstacles are not insurmountable (Hubble et al., 2019). However, Reay et al. (2001a) suggested that working class students can feel a dissonance between their home life and their educational aspirations which can be severe enough for them to drop out of their studies. This means that they may need greater resilience in order to study, than learners who are viewed as more traditional participants in HE. Reay et al. (2001a) term it an '*institutional habitus*' which conflict sociologists like Reay et al. and Bourdieu (1986) would argue is influenced by the middle-class milieu of the college, created by staff within it, which can seem alien to WP cohorts who start with little or no access to what Bourdieu (1986:243) terms, 'capital'. Such students are seeking to increase it via the attainment of educational qualifications. A by-product of this could be that they also increase their social capital or societal connections as well through the relationships formed at FEIs. A partial absorption of the identity of 'student' leading to their poor integration within a HE environment may mean the individual feels they neither fit in as a 'student' nor at home with family and friends (Reay et al., 2001a). This perspective focuses very much on a deficit model and suggests WP students are not accessing education because they are lacking social capital (Smit, 2012). Smit suggests that HEIs should be

considering how to adapt to the needs of WP students, rather than potential new students adapting to HE environments.

Another factor in under-representation could be the possible barrier of previous participation. Prospective HE students with no familial history of HE are less likely to study for a degree themselves (ESFA, 2017). 'First generation HE' as a factor may be best understood, like the concept of WP, more in terms of the overall picture of social advantage or disadvantage which pervades the life of an individual student, a case of privilege in one area being indistinguishable from privilege in another (Glover et al., 2002).

First generation HE study is a dimension of social capital because of the networks available to students via their own or close friends and family contacts (Forsythe and Adams, 2004). This suggests that any experience of or allegiance to a graduate identity is secondary to family or socioeconomic status as a determinant of degree level study (Gorard and Smith, 2006; BIS, 2015).

According to the department of Business Innovation and Skills, (2015), FEIs are especially good at mitigating the intimidation that a HEI can have for working class students and have been very successful in developing the skills and qualifications of WP cohorts (BIS, 2014). FEIs may be good at engaging WP students, but they are often frustrated in their efforts to do this by governmental funding and accountability strategies. Current funding takes little account of the additional recruitment and support activities which are needed by HE institutions to both attract and retain WP students (Brehoney and Deem, 2005; Sperlinger et al., 2018). These difficulties seem to speak to Bernstein's (1970) memorable quote that

'education cannot compensate for society'. This assertion may have been aimed at compulsory education, but it seems just as relevant today to HE and recent attempts to widen participation.

Changes in funding methodology for students since The Browne Report (2010) have been a disincentive to part time study for both students and institutions which have disproportionately affected WP cohort students (Watt and Paterson, 2010). It is this worrying decline that will now be explored.

2.4.5 Funding for part-time and widening participation students.

Nationally, the number of part time students have fallen by 57 per cent since 2010 (HESA, 2018). The situation, particularly for part-time HE students who are often WP learners, is not an improving one since the advent of austerity in 2010 (Sperlinger et al., 2018). There are a number of reasons for declining part time student numbers. The financial implications for HEIs and FEIs of admitting WP and part time learners, include additional activities such as admissions interviewing (AoC, 2018). Level 3 Further Education evening classes are open access routes to HE but are more likely to attract lower numbers of students and are therefore vulnerable to the course being discontinued. This may disadvantage WP students who are more often found in evening classes because of family and employment responsibilities. This means that WP students are likely to lose access to foundation courses which will develop their academic skills and they are therefore less likely to progress to HE and more likely to drop out of their courses if they do (Sperlinger et al., 2018).

Government rhetoric has encouraged widening participation for part time students since the Browne Report (2010) and it is still in evidence with strategies such as 'fast track' degrees (Fazackerley, 2017). However, it seems counterproductive for HE institutions to adapt to the needs of WP cohorts which will disadvantage them in terms of national statistics and comparisons, and which may also influence future recruitment (Burke, 2012).

As far back as 2006, in a review for HEFCE, Gorard and Smith (2006) suggested that universities most successful with WP students are also at risk of having the highest dropout rates.

The benefits of engaging and meeting the needs of adult learners are multiple. They are more motivated and more likely to complete their studies and obtain better degrees than younger students (Prymachuk et al., 2009). It could also be argued that failure to provide for older students is a failure to facilitate lifelong learning. This would seem to be contradictory to the Government's policy of upskilling the population and widening participation in education (Cornell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). This is also likely to affect the ability of industry to operate effectively by ensuring there is a supply of the right skills and at the level needed at any given time (Schuller and Watson, 2007).

There were already barriers to HE access, faced by WP students from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, such as aversion to debt accrual, which mean they are more likely to be discouraged from applying and sustaining their study on HE courses for financial reasons (Callender and Jackson, 2008). The focus within neoliberalism has been on well informed and self-interested individuals and there seems little consideration whether these 'ideal consumers' are more or less likely to withdraw if they come from a WP or non-

traditional background. Nor has there been consideration of what the implication is of finding themselves involved in what can be seen as a less than satisfactory 'product', in this case HE in FE. New funding regimes after 2010 favoured younger, full time HE students and larger classes, which are therefore more resource efficient (Maringe, 2006). The introduction of adult learning loans for pre-HE in FE qualifications could have the same financial disincentive for older students who wish to study at degree level (AoC, 2018).

There were also concerns that the introduction of fees would mean widening participation students are even less likely to apply for HE study (Bennett, 2010). Callender's (1999) research in Further Education, based on a multistage sample of 80 colleges and 1000 students within them, found that colleges believe financial hardship is a significant factor in the retention of students. Callender's Interviews with students provided some support for this as 56 per cent of the 2 in 5 who had considered dropping out cited this as a reason. It has to be noted, however, her research took place before the introduction of loans was properly felt and could be attributable to perception rather than reality. On the other hand, in an environment of student loans, it is possible that financial hardship is even more significant in analysis of student drop-out.

An alternative view to financial hardship being the overwhelming reason for widening participation student withdrawal from HE studies, comes from a governmental briefing paper in which Cornell-Smith and Hubble, (2018) suggest declining representation in HE is about social grouping rather than financial hardship. Younger white males and older students are declining in numbers, rather than those from ethnic minority backgrounds or those with a disability who had increased in participation between 2009 and 2015. Yorke

and Thomas (2003) conducted research with six HEIs in the UK that were high performing in the retention and completion of their WP students. This significant study also suggested that culture and policy, rather than funding, are central to why WP students withdraw from study. Davies' (2000) review of research in the Further Education sector for the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), also challenged the view that financial issues alone are key to student participation and retention. Thomas's (2002) case study of a HEI proving successful in terms of WP performance indicators, noted that students cope with high levels of debt if they feel supported by the HEI. Davies (2000) also noted that if students are satisfied generally with their study experience, they will be resilient against any financial difficulty. It appears that the use of funding to explain issues around WP under engagement in HE seems convenient, rather than supported with evidence from research.

In summary, Martinez (2001) noted that prior to 1991 factors external to colleges were assumed to be key to a student's leaving their course of study. Later, Gorard (2007) suggested finance is less important to HE student retention than factors within HE institutions themselves. The truth may lie somewhere in the middle as the culture and fee levels of many HEIs may be discouraging widening participation students whereas FEIs who offer HE are, on balance, a little more successful at providing a welcoming environment for WP students. WP students may require less personal resilience to overcome the dissonance of study at an institution, which seems unfamiliar (Reay et al., 2005; ESFA, 2017). However, these same institutions may experience difficulty in providing appropriate support to WP students due to funding scarcity and accountability measures in the post 2010 austerity era.

Marketisation can mean a mismatch of expectations between the subjective, individual student's perceptions about what they should be receiving from FE colleges. This policy will now be examined in terms of the pressure it can place on the HE in FE student resilience, that can lead to dissatisfaction and withdrawal.

2.4.6 Marketisation and student expectations

After 2010, austerity funding measures meant it became increasingly difficult for colleges to stretch their funding to cover teaching, learning and support adequately, and in trying to do so resourcing FE became like a tablecloth that was just too small to cover the table. As previously mentioned, quasi-markets, under a neoliberal agenda, change the very nature of Higher Education as a public endeavour (LeGrand et al., 2008). Molesworth et al. (2010) suggest that the change is as much ideological and political as it is economic. This means students are potentially caught between two narratives. On the one side, the belief in education for social betterment which fits a collectivist endeavour; and on the other, the prevailing neoliberal Government agenda which, since 1979, has seen education as a contribution to economic prosperity but has also recast it as individualist with students as consumers having the responsibility to ensure they receive value for money as they see it (Brown and Carasso, 2013). However, this assumes that prospective students are able to see themselves as informed consumers and are also in possession of enough information about the education system to choose effectively. If either is not in place, then student resilience may be stretched and contribute to poor retention. This could be a vicious circle for WP students who are likely to be the least informed and empowered.

Marketisation brings with it the perception of students as having 'paid' for a good degree and expect any and all support they need to achieve it (Gleeson, 2005). This has led to a, presumably unintended, consequence of marketisation as a change in the ethos of education, from one which challenges students' opinions and perceptions to one which comprehensively supports the student's own view, *'Degrees can be bought; an understanding of the discipline cannot'* (Molesworth et al. (2010:5). In this climate, it is a short step to trying to ensure student numbers by marketing courses as overly supportive or less demanding, than many may perceive.

The position of marketised students was reinforced following the Foster Report (2005) as their role was bolstered as key stakeholders. This should have created a personalised, student-centred experience, through consultation (Hall, 2017). Knowledge which is available to other players in the system, such as college managers and Government, may not necessarily be made available to students and may even be actively withheld (Le Grand et al., 2008). This means that an FEIs can be placed in the awkward position of being little better than an unscrupulous salesman. Student feedback often focuses on increasing resources, both teaching and physical, with the reasonable assumption that what they have been told by Government and through student engagement strategies - that enhanced resources are both possible and reasonable. The reality is that this is likely to be at odds with the Education and Skills Funding Agency emphasis on accountability and efficiency (ESFA, 2017). Insufficient resources can leave students understandably disappointed and disillusioned.

As more powerful players, FE managers often make college policy decisions, which can affect the student experience and may impact on student satisfaction with their study (Clewes, 2003). The implications of this will now be examined.

2.4.7 Marketisation, tutor identity and the FE managers' dilemma

It is becoming increasingly difficult for HE in FE tutors to reconcile traditional Higher Education teaching values, such as fostering independent learners, with marketised students' own expectation to be supported consumers (Lowe and Cook, 2003). Students may now be unfamiliar with HE learning expectations such as background reading and note taking (Palfreyman and Temple, 2017). Tutors find consumerist students can sometimes expect excessive scaffolding, which is Bruner's (in Hammond and Gibbons, 2005) term for support handed out to a learner to enable them to achieve the task which has been set for them, rather than enabling them to complete it independently (Glassman, 2001). This is alongside the need for WP students to be able to assimilate skills more quickly to ensure higher rates of achievement because of the tightening of accountability post 2010 (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Tomlinson, 2014). FE managers may respond to this by encouraging greater tutor support as they are anxious to secure a maximum number of student achievements. Such achievements will ultimately translate into more funding and better positions in national league tables, such as the National Student Survey, in turn this enables marketing opportunities for future students and encourages more applications (Lea et al., 2003). However, tutor workloads may mean reduced ability to meet both the manager and student expectation of individualised support (Tomlinson, 2014).

In FEIs, the perception is that tutors in HEIs prioritise their professional identity and research (Taylor, 2008). There is an expectation placed on HE in FE tutors to not only teach, but also to engage in scholarly activity (Feather, 2010). When this academic identity is prioritised, availability to students can be reduced and this can be at odds with teaching and the fostering of a relationship with students (Oxford, 2008). However, Lumby (2009) suggests that the reality is that tutors within HEIs are themselves experiencing dissonance from the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which ensures a divide between those who mainly research and those who predominantly teach, with teaching, at least prior to the TEF, often being viewed as the poor relation (Gunn, 2017). Although some FEIs who deliver HE are doing research, it is usually small scale and rarely externally funded. The status attached to research is less significant in FEIs as it concerns so few members of staff.

Financial pressures arising from increasing marketisation mean that any perceived gaps in the teaching approaches between HEIs and FEIs could well be narrowing (Lumby, 2009). Clegg (2008) suggests that in HEIs academic and pastoral roles are now much more fluid and possibly closer to the traditional, further education approach to teaching, which is to emphasise the importance of relationships between students and staff as a key factor in successful study (Salisbury et al., 2006; Jephcote et al., 2008). The implications of this are that HE in FE may lose some of its advantage in facilitating a different learning experience for WP students, and the HE student market could become relatively generic with comparable teaching provision across HEIs and FEIs. The main difference would then be in cost. However, The Auger Review (2019) has recently recommended the capping of

university fees at £7500 and, if implemented, it may well remove this difference between HE provision within the two sectors.

In a marketised education system, HE in FE students often expect to have a high level of teaching and individual contact time with tutors (Lea et al., 2003). Glogowska et al. (2007:63) suggest managers must make decisions, regarding which 'pull or push' factor is the strongest. Further Education college managers are left with trying to accommodate the conflicting requirements of the ESFA, the OfS and the students themselves who all want more for less, but with differing priorities regarding what value for money might look like. The FE manager must negotiate a path between the need for efficiency and ensuring students have an adequate learning experience. Tutors impacted by funding decisions may, in turn, agree with dissatisfied students but may also be disempowered by years of compliance sanctions and so are less able to objectively assess the implications (Smith, 2015). This is unfortunate, as staff opinions about learning matters can contribute to the future prosperity of FEIs but they are too often left isolated if they disagree with managers (Unwin in Derrick et al., 2010).

This can lead to a situation in which managers, staff and students may all disagree with the ethics of a funding decision and are essentially all feeling the effects of an anti-collectivist, quasi marketised approach to higher education, but it is left to managers to weigh up the need for efficiency against the possibility of the college's financial unsustainability in this political climate. HE in FE tutors are in the middle of potentially conflicting expectations from research or teaching to pastoral or academic support functions (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). These conflicting demands of a marketised system can play out within the student

experience and can lead to student disengagement from study due to factors beyond their control. Douglas et al., (2015) found that it was individual encounters which usually determine the student experience of a HE institution. For example, poor resourcing of key services like information technology or reducing tutor time and attention can provoke disillusionment and stress beyond individual student resilience.

Student satisfaction, as evidenced through the National Student Survey, can affect institutional recruitment and therefore financial viability (Brehoney and Deem, 2005; Bates and Kaye, 2014). The role which marketisation may play in driving student dissatisfaction will now be examined.

2.4.8 Marketisation as a possible driver of student disengagement

Thanks to greater access to performance indicators, student expectations may have been informed by a number of official sources, including published data such as key information sets (KIS data), league tables and the national student survey (NSS); as well as publicity materials such as a prospectus or website. They may also have been influenced informally by personal experience of college from their prior studies or family and friends (Gorard and Smith, 2006). This information is intended to empower student choice of HE programmes and assert their ability to make active choices as consumers in a marketised education system (Tomlinson, 2014; Bates and Kaye, 2014). However, maximising funding does not necessarily require either Higher or Further Education to become a market. Marketisation can sometimes be used as shorthand for management cultures, targets and an ethos that somehow the private sector is better than the public. In this climate, 'efficiency' could be used to justify cuts.

Another difficulty is that the marketisation process has not been static. Pressures have been brought about by the gradual reduction in funding and increase in regulatory control up to 2010 and the subsequent more dramatic reductions as a result of the Government policy of 'austerity' (Hodgson et al., 2015). The student's *perception* of power and choice over study due to their payment of fees is in reality, limited (Molesworth et al, 2010). They have some ability to exert pressure for piecemeal adjustments to provision through student forums and feedback mechanisms, such as, module and course evaluations or the NSS. However, they do not hold the lion's share of power to create change; that rests with Government policy but it still has to be implemented by colleges, governors, senior management teams and line managers. In this environment, students can feel disillusioned and possibly powerless and there can be a perception of poor 'value for money' with their course simply because they expected to be able to have more of a say about how and what is provided (Clewes, 2003). As well as a mismatch between what they thought they had 'bought' and what they received. Molesworth et al. (2010) suggests that this kind of situation is further exacerbated in a marketised education system by the media who encourage students and their parents to complain and frame HEIs and FEIs as the focus of that dissatisfaction. This effectively deflects blame from the Government and even anti-collectivism itself as holding any possible responsibility. Students in this position may then leave the course to transfer to institutions whose course offering is perceived to be more reliable (Clewes, 2003). The reality is that all FEIs are subject to the same neoliberal funding regimes which led to the initial dissatisfaction, and therefore their experience may be different but is unlikely to be much improved overall.

This has left HE in FE in an impossible situation as it tries to meet the expectations of students who are not always certain of exactly what those expectations are, and which vary from student to student (Tomlinson, 2014; Bates and Kaye, 2014). Smith (2015) suggests that it is not only students who have become self-interested. FE colleges and indeed members of staff are finding they have to shift their own personal philosophies from encouraging independent learners and education being front and centre, to innovate and meet the needs of increasingly dependent learners. This has to be achieved in an environment in which the educational values of staff are not always widely shared by managers. This mismatch in expectation can mean a student becomes disengaged from their studies by placing too much pressure on their resilience and dropping out of their HE in FE course.

Employers can be important to HE in FE. The Government policy as set out in the BIS workforce strategy (2014) expects FE colleges to provide students with skills employers need. The realities of bringing this about are complex and can cause stress to student resilience when the needs of students, FEIs and employers are misaligned. This will be examined in the next section of the review.

2.4.9 Employer influence through the student's learning journey

Employers are encouraged to have an influence on students' experience in an FE college. This includes HE in FE because the purpose of many Foundation Degrees is to meet local employer need. For example, Early Years degree programmes have been developed in response to liaison with local early years settings in some FE colleges. The health and social care degree is often part of a scheme to progress students straight to a nursing degree and

from there to local NHS Trusts in order to meet employer need. Local employer need and student demand are probably the two main reasons for the development of FD provision in FEIs.

For the relationship between employer and FEI to be effective, employers need to engage in a dialogue with colleges and provide funding for the training of young people in a harmonious and symbiotic relationship (Smith, 2007a; BIS, 2014). The reality is more like a complex interplay between what employers may require in a market system regarding current or future skills, and the extent to which these needs are communicated to FE colleges. Only a very small number seem to genuinely engage with FEIs in the development of FD programmes, possibly only when their employee skills shortage has become acute.

In reality, students take courses for all kinds of reasons from peer and parental pressure to self-improvement and career development. HE in FE students are more likely to pick what they are interested in or good at, rather than what employers need per se (Teichler, 2003). Wilton (2011) suggests that student choice may compound the disadvantage experienced by a WP cohort. He suggests that attempts to overcome WP disadvantage have been inadequately addressed by colleges with an employability skills training curriculum as an add-on to full time courses. Increased attention to part-time learning and Higher Education in Further Education vocational degrees would support a more flexible employability agenda more naturally for a WP cohort than an 'add on' to full time programmes (Sperlinger et al., 2018).

Neoliberalised Government funding methodologies favour those subjects which they believe are more advantageous to employers, but that does not necessarily coincide with employers' or students' own perception of what employers want (Willetts, 2017; Sperlinger et al., 2018). The resulting curriculum becomes the current, often incoherent result of the competing priorities of college availability: what tutors can teach, students' preferences, employer interest and what Government will support. This increases the level of difficulty students experience when trying to make informed career decisions about the right course for them. As a result, it may stretch their resilience when they begin to perceive a mismatch between what they are studying and their potential or current employer's need. In this circumstance they may leave before completing their HE in FE course.

The choice of degree subject, whether influenced by employer or personal need, may also be important in determining the likelihood of a HE in FE student being retained. It is this possible factor that will now be considered.

2.4.10 The influence of subject choice on retention

The degree subjects offered could influence drop out within HE in FE. Woodfield (2014) suggests that across the HE sector average retention is 94 per cent, so any discipline scoring above or below this figure is significant. Retention in degree subjects often offered by FEIs which had lower rates included Computer Science (91 per cent) Hospitality, Sport, Leisure and Tourism (92 per cent). Engineering has continuation rates of 90 per cent whereas, Marketing, Business and management and the Built environment average at 94 per cent. There is a difference for mode of attendance in some disciplines. In Marketing,

for example, part-time students are four times more likely to leave than full time learners.

There was no such difference between modes of attendance in the Built Environment (Woodfield, 2014). It is also worth noting that these figures do not reflect HE in FE exclusively as the data are not disaggregated but do reflect degree provision across the UK.

Student satisfaction, and therefore retention, may be based on the relevance of a degree to a future career (Trotter and Cove, 2005). This could explain why arts subjects may be vulnerable to student drop out as they provide the least advantage in terms of future earnings potential (Walker and Zhu, 2003). Woodfield (2014) suggests that degree subject choice alone is only one factor in retention and there are many other variables, which are also likely to be interdependent. For example, age, gender, socioeconomic status, mode of study and ethnicity which may also influence subject choice and vulnerability to withdrawal, and therefore be the more reliable predictor of leaving than selection of disciplinary area alone (Woodfield, 2014).

This review has considered the main factors, which are identified in the literature as likely to affect the resilience of HE in FE students, and which can mean they are not retained on their degree level course. The last section of the review will summarise the possible effect of these factors on student resilience and retention.

2.5 Chapter Summary

The literature review has addressed research questions 1 and 2 concerning the reasons the students give for leaving their course before completion and the importance of resilience to student retention at HE level. The review was divided into three distinct areas. These

are factors, which are individual to the student, as well as those external and internal to FEIs. The following section is a summary of the findings.

Resilience is difficult to define and can change both over time and in different situations, meaning that what is survivable today may not be in the future (Rutter, 2012). Resilience seems to operate like weights on a balance and consists of the interplay of circumstances in all domains of a student's life including home, work and study mentioned in the review. Hedberg and Tone's (2014) 'enablers' or 'stressors' in one or more of these areas or domains will affect the overall ability of the student to be resilient (Gu and Day, 2006; Bergmann et al. 2019). The exact situation which may overwhelm the student's resilience and tip the balance, leading to their departure, is individual to the student, but it could be as little as one significant incident or several reasons working together, either on the course or in the wider college (Douglas et al., 2015:332). Writers such as Garrett (2015) suggests the use of the term 'resilience' is laden with value judgements about behaviour which may simply be the same disadvantages which WP students can face, particularly in a neoliberalised education system, which offers the perception of student power, but the reality is that often WP students remain the least informed and empowered (Le Grand et al., 2008). The concept of resilience may simply be used as a convenient term to ensure that students are expected to perform beyond their capabilities in an FE education system which has undergone systematic underfunding, especially since 2010.

The impact of mental health on the ability of the HE in FE student to be resilient is not straightforward. HE study and achieving a qualification engenders personal wellbeing but is weighted against commitment to study and how that reduces short term wellbeing, which

may mean students drop out of HE in FE study. (Prichard and Wilson, 2003; Rose, 2017).

Similarly, physical ill health may precipitate student drop out by acting as a general stressor upon the student's resilience (Gu and Day, 2006; Hedberg and Tone, 2014).

Reasons why students may not stay on their HE in FE course are also likely to be influenced by what happens within FEIs on the HE in FE student's learning journey. Those students who are from a widening participation background are often the least empowered groups in society and least well informed about the machinations of a convoluted HE system, which means they are unlikely to make truly informed decisions about their HE institution or course choices (Le Grand et al., 2008). This can manifest in a variety of situations within the college and is underpinned by the marketisation of HE. Ineffective pre-course entry and guidance, especially those within the WP cohort, in colleges such as Northsall, may become another source of stress to their resilience if HE in FE students find themselves on the wrong course (Stronach et al., 2002:131). Poor IAG can therefore represent a 'critical incident' which means students do not stay and achieve their degree (Krieschok, 1998; Douglas et al., 2015: 332).

The quality of teaching and learning and relationships with fellow students can bolster HE students' resilience and provide a buffer from resource shortages, particularly since 2010 (Gill, 2016). This can be done through tutors supporting self-efficacy and can mean students stay and achieve, even in a situation in which they are facing one or more difficult life situations which otherwise would have outweighed their resilience (Swain and Hammond, 2011; Robertson, 2012). Wider college services such as IT support, student services and library staff can also influence how HE in FE students feel about their studies.

They can contribute to their integration into FEIs as well as offset the dissonance WP students can feel between home and college, which will ultimately impact on their retention (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005).

Poor attendance is often the first indication that a HE in FE student is experiencing stress on their personal resilience and may be vulnerable to leaving their course (Porter, 2008; O'Donnell, 2009). The attendance expectation of many FEIs is unrealistic for many WP students who are juggling commitments such as family and employment (Sperlinger et al., 2018). Poor attendance must be responded to in a timely and effective manner if a college is to be successful in reengaging students as at risk of leaving (Park et al., 2011).

The final overarching factor is external to the college and concerns the student experience and their ability to be resilient, but which are often the least visible to the student. The change in social policy from collectivism to neoliberalism after 1979 has brought about a gradual increase in monitoring and performativity measures in education. This has been used by the Government as one of the '*policy levers*' to ensure the implementation of changes to practice within FEIs (Spours et al., 2008:1). This has impacted on the FE sector from 1993 and become even more acute following 2010 and the coalition Government's policy of 'austerity' which effectively reduced funding to FEIs. The marketisation of HE via the new policy of student fees replacing core funding in 1998 has impacted upon the attitudes of students who are increasingly viewing themselves as consumers rather than recipients of educational opportunities. Unfortunately, this is more often a case of 'smoke and mirrors' because prospective students, especially those in widening participation groups are the least powerful players in the education system. This means they are often

less well informed about how much and what kind of change is actually possible in the FE sector (Molesworth et al., 2010).

Widening participation is a concept which is popular in government rhetoric, but is hard to prove (Gorard, 2007). There are groups in society who seem to be under-represented within higher education (Cornell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). However, what they consist of and how to address this inequality is harder to define. The simplest explanation is that the education system reflects society and disadvantage in one is also evident in the other and can be viewed as a deficit of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Smit, 2012). This is demonstrated by the polarisation of universities between those within the Russell Group and others who seem to be most involved in engaging WP cohorts (Younger et al., 2019). This makes it difficult to assess the impact of WP issues on resilience and retention, although it seems likely that HE in FE students are disproportionately disadvantaged by the funding reductions after 2010 since they are usually adult and part time (Sperlinger et al., 2018). The persisting underrepresentation of some students in HE in FE may suggest that the move from a collectivist to a competitive approach to funding education via a quasi-market system since 1992 may not be the most effective approach to support widening participation.

Further Education colleges have traditionally been successful in emphasising teaching rather than lecturing and may be better at reflecting and accommodating WP experience within their teaching pedagogy than HEIs (ESFA, 2017). They are also disadvantaged because of their success with WP students who are more time consuming and costly to support (Reay et al., 2001a). This is because of their need for effective transition and

support in an environment; which is less familiar to them than for middle class, younger students (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003).

Further Education tutors are increasingly having to embrace a wider range of pastoral and academic roles with increased accountability for student enrolment and satisfaction which has impacted on their workload (Gleeson, 2005). Building relationships between tutors and students could be a strategy to improve retention and achievement by creating resilience (Gu and Day, 2006). Unfortunately, decreasing funding, especially since 2010, has diminished tutor time and availability for students (Robertson, 2012; Tomlinson, 2014).

Employers are expected and often do have an influence on the curriculum in FEIs.

However, employer requirements and the subjects HE in FE students want to study, and what FE colleges can offer are often misaligned (Willetts, 2017; Sperlinger et al., 2018).

This can mean students experience stress to their resilience from the perception of studying a subject that may not lead to employment.

In summary, the level of resilience that a HE in FE student possesses will be balanced by the factors discussed in this review. If these factors become tipped beyond what an individual student can endure, they will leave their HE in FE course (Gu and Day, 2006; Robertson, 2012). The neoliberal policy of marketisation in education and especially in HE, from 1979 has created student disappointment with their marketised learning experience. This dissatisfaction can place pressure on HE in FE students’ resilience (Kuh et al., 2011). Tutors can mitigate the effects of marketisation, but their ability to do so has been limited by the same financial constraints which can frustrate students (Tomlinson, 2014).

The research questions arose from the professional experiences of the researcher and were refined through the literature review. The concept of resilience began to emerge as an important underlying mediator of the impact on the difficulties which HE in FE students face in their learning journey. It seemed to become an explanation of the interplay between individual reasons which existing research have identified for poor student retention. Bergmann et al.'s, (2019) assertion that resilience can affect different domains in a student's life seems relevant to understanding the nature of resilience and student retention. Visualising the factors students face as weights on a balance or, as Brown et al. (2001) suggest, assets against risk factors, seemed to explain the reasons for HE students not continuing their studies.

Specific factors identified by the literature as reasons for HE in FE students leaving their course fell into the three overarching themes. These were factors individual to the student, as well as factors internal and external to the college. It was important to listen to former students' accounts about why they left. This was unlikely to include a concept such as resilience. This led to the first Research Question, *'What reasons do students give for leaving their course before completion?'* which offered an opportunity for the ex-students in their own voice to have an opportunity to identify where themes in the literature review were underpinned by students' experiences.

The second Research Question, *'How important is resilience to student retention at HE level?'* arose from the literature and a desire to assess its importance and explore whether Rutter's (2012) attributes of resilience as flexible and dynamic apply to the HE in FE student experience. This could also mean, as Robertson (2012) suggests, that FEIs could

influence resilience and help to build it in for students who may be at risk of dropping out.

The final Research Question became, *'What are the implications for FEIs of effectively supporting Higher Education in Further Education students to complete their degree level studies?'*. This research enables the use of the research to underpin improvements to practice, which will be addressed at the end of the study.

The next chapter describes the research and methods used to address the first two research questions.

Chapter 3: Research Procedure

3.1 Approach to the research

The research is based on opportunistic access to three Further Education colleges due to the professional background and experience of the researcher; this enabled the research to be conducted from an insider perspective. This approach can give both a unique professionally informed understanding of the issues investigated but also allow access to hard-to-reach participants, such as those students who had left their degree level study. The first two RQs were *‘What reasons do students give for leaving their course before completion?’* and *‘How important is resilience to student retention at HE level?’*. They arose from a concern to understand why students who had committed to study at degree level dropped out of their courses. Using, predominantly, one college which is familiar to the researcher, enabled a qualitative approach, which was likely to have greater validity from an interpretivist perspective. Obtaining access to students who had left at other institutions would have been virtually impossible, given that I wanted to hear from students first-hand, staff in other institutions might have seen this as a conflict of interest. The inclusion of three tutors at Northsall and three SSOs, one from Northsall and two from other colleges with HE in FE provision, allows for further exploration and triangulation of the ex-student participant data.

3.2 Ethical issues

All participants in social research must be protected from harm or disadvantage that may occur as a result of taking part in research (BERA, 2018). Permission and ethical approval was sought from Northsall. Permission was also secured from the Open University (OU) ethics committee before data collection, using the risk checklist provided by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) which was followed up with the human ethics committee proforma (Appendix 3). This included designing information sheets and consent forms together with copies of interview questions, which were made available to staff participants in advance (Appendices 4 and 5).

The research evolved from two pilot studies. The main change was from interviewing current students and staff to interviewing former students, as the main participant group, along with current teaching staff and support staff I have called Student Services Officers (SSOs). Subsequently, an amended proposal was sent to the OU ethics committee in September 2016 and further ethical approval was received to conduct the research. A copy of the amendment and approval are available (Appendix 6).

The ex-student participants had all experienced difficulties and asking them to revisit an unhappy period in their lives needed sensitivity. Explanations of the research were given at the beginning of the telephone conversation, as clearly as possible, prior to any questioning, whilst trying to avoid discouraging participation with too long an explanation. Both the right to withdraw at any time and the right to not answer any individual questions were clearly explained. Final farewells always included mentioning that the SSO would be happy to support any students who needed further help following the interviews.

3.2.1 Identifying information

The staff interviews in the pilot study extended to teaching staff and the Northsall SSO. In the main study, due to the SSO acting as intermediary, it was possible to arrange interviews with ex-students as well as teaching staff; initially only the SSO from Northsall was included. There were concerns that this may leave her vulnerable as there was awareness of the research amongst senior staff at Northsall who may be able to identify her as the source of much of the support staff data in the study. It was, therefore, necessary to include two other SSOs from other GFE colleges in the region. This gave an interesting cross institution and SSO role perspective to the research and added further insights, but importantly, it protected the SSO's identity. Another measure to further protect their identity, was the use of a name for the SSO from Northsall, which has been avoided prior to the discussion section. This means the perspectives of three district SSOs are discernible in the discussion chapter, but the identification of which of them is from Northsall is less possible.

3.3 Methodological and epistemological standpoint

3.3.1 The positivist viewpoint

The approach taken by this research is anti-positivist, qualitative and interpretivist. However, this was determined in the context of considering alternative epistemological standpoints. There has been recent debate around the nature of educational research in terms of how much it can and should contribute to direct improvement in the delivery of education (Biesta, 2007). This suggests that educational research hypotheses should be focused directly on teaching and learning improvement and, as such, belong to a positivist paradigm (Plowright, 2011). Positivism suggests that ontologically there are universal laws

or truths which exist about the world and that these can be studied and discovered in an objective and scientific manner with the establishment of a direct relationship between what does and does not work within the classroom, known as, 'evidence-based practice' (Plowright, 2011). This refers to one side of a complex debate surrounding the role of scientific research within education. This debate is also about the use of positivist research to inform Government policy on education. It underpins notions of the nature of teaching as an activity that can be measured to reveal universal laws, which can be applied across the sector, to improve teaching and learning methods. This is a view espoused by Ravich (1998) and echoed previously in this country by Hargreaves (1996). Positivism seems to assume that individuals conform to societal norms and values unconsciously. Therefore, these laws are unlikely to be discoverable by understanding the participants' own understanding of their actions (Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford, 1997). An anti-positivist position of attempting to understand the participants' own views of the reasons and meanings behind their behaviour, is better suited to this study.

3.3.2 The interpretivist viewpoint

The anti-positivist perspective is better suited to RQs 1 and 2, which focus on the reasons students give for leaving their course before completion and how important resilience is to students staying and achieving at, HE level. This underpinning interpretivist paradigm recognises the individual as a recipient of society's influences but retaining the ability to filter and mediate how their behaviour may be influenced (Mack, 2010:8). The application of the researcher's insight may provide the opportunity to document, by actively supporting the perspectives of the participants, and attempting to understand the personal filters on experience which may be applied by the individuals, in social situations

(Hammersley et al., 2001). This approach attempts to get behind the understanding the individual has of their own decision-making processes as such processes govern our behaviour. It is important to recognise that the researcher may also be influenced by this co-construction, especially as an employee and ex-employee at Northsall (Le Gallais, 2008). The implications of this will be discussed more fully in subsequent sections on insider research.

The individual viewpoint is formed by a combination of genetics and the environment(s) in which people have existed, within their own family, work, and community, before they arrived at Northsall (Gorard and Smith, 2006). Northsall already exists with its own culture and values which are formed from the negotiated and co-constructed sum of the individuals, from the past as well as those who are currently there, including staff, senior managers, middle managers, teaching staff and wider college services and administrators. Any individual entering Northsall, either for employment or study, must reconcile their own beliefs and expectations with the culture they encounter at Northsall to form their own individual, and likely unique, experience of Northsall.

Figure 2 (below) attempts to explain how relationships between individuals in Northsall are co-constructed. When a student or staff member comes to Northsall, which could include all teaching and non-teaching staff, they come with their own set of beliefs, expectations, and values.

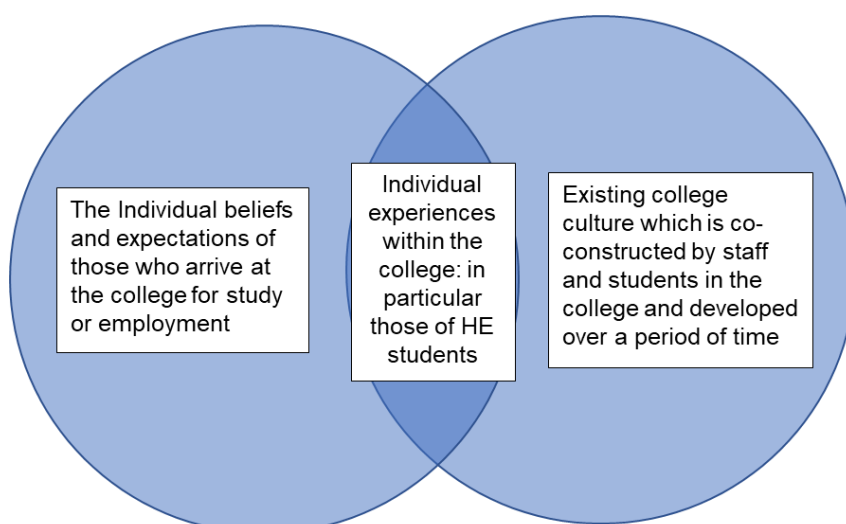


Figure 2: The co-constructed nature of relationships between individuals at Northsall.

Just as Jefferson (1776) suggested '*All men are not created equal*', it is also true that all players in Figure 2 are subject to power relationships which can mean that some exert more influence than others. This is usually achieved through the medium of agency which produces, according to Foucault (in Nealon, 2008:4) an interplay between independence and resistance to that independence. Those with greatest access to information and power will exert the greatest influence. In this case this is likely to be staff before students, and if extrapolated beyond the diagram, Government before all other players.

Taking a qualitative approach to the experiences of participants within Northsall means that the research's validity is in reflecting individual experiences and, as such, their generalisability to other Higher Education in Further Education students or other FEIs, may be questionable. This will be explored further in the next section.

3.3.3 The significance of small-scale research

Northsall may be larger than many GFE colleges in terms of the numbers of students and the range of courses it offers (Collab group, 2020). That diversity may mean that issues encountered at Northsall are likely to be relevant to other FE colleges of a similar size and diversity. The inclusion of the perspectives of staff from two other GFEs increases the likelihood that there is likely to be some opportunity to generalise. As a broadly WP college, there may be some issues which Northsall faces with regard to student support which may not be applicable to smaller colleges or those in less disadvantaged areas.

The history of Northsall in terms of the government's assessment of its provision is a declining one. The last three Ofsted reports have seen the college go from 'outstanding' in 2008 through 'satisfactory' in the last report to 'requires improvement' most recently in 2020 (reference withheld). This could mean that the issues the research may identify are unusual and indicative of a college with fluctuating fortunes; however, the decline in grading could also mean there are issues which the research may bring into sharper relief because of the change in circumstances which Northsall has experienced. This decline in Ofsted assessments is mirrored by the reduction in funding which the FE sector has experienced (AoC, 2019), most notably since 2010. This could be reflected in the students' experiences, which the study will highlight. Since all GFEs are subject to the same funding regimes, this could mean that Northsall's fortunes could be described as typical of the sector and possibly representative of other FEIs.

The incompatibility of qualitative research with generalisable findings must also be noted. Fendler (2006) suggests that the generalisability of qualitative educational research findings is neither possible nor desirable, but that does not make the research any less necessary. The social sciences, she argues, are about the study of human beings and not statistics. Qualitative research allows us to understand individuals, their feelings, and their experiences and provides insight into participants' experiences of how systems or processes work. It can be sector or institution specific, and it can identify issues that deserve further investigation.

In the spirit of methodological pluralism, there may be some common themes that have emerged across participant responses, which suggest that aspects of the former students' college experiences, could be common to other students (Yin, 2009). This is contrasted with the responses of the SSOs and current teaching staff participants who are working with many students. With due consideration to other research from the literature review, tentative suggestions for future practice may be possible but always with recognition of the local conditions to which FE colleges within the UK will be subject (Hammersley et al., 2001).

Small scale research can depend heavily on the status of the researcher themselves, within the institution in which they are researching. One of the most significant issues, which can influence the research, is whether they are an insider or an outsider (Le Gallais, 2008). This potentially significant issue will now be considered.

3.3.4 Insider research

When the study began, I was employed at Northsall. Insider research can be an *'empowering process'* (Bennett, 1996:4) and embarking on research in your own area of expertise has a potential to enable a level of understanding which can facilitate problem solving and much deeper and evidenced future practice in the field. It necessarily involves both personal and professional reflection and there is a strong tradition of it within education as a discipline (Dewey, 2010 in Simpson and Slack, 2010).

As a practitioner in the Higher Education and Further Education sector for many years, the assumption could be that this can lead to insider bias, that is, feeling part of the collective identity of the college (Merton, 1972). This membership of the 'in group' afforded the ability to prevail upon the professional relationship I had with the SSO at Northsall in order to facilitate the collection of ex-student perspectives. My own values as a collaborator in FE culture may be influencing the kinds of questions I asked and my expectation of responses. This, likely, depends on my own perception of 'otherness' to influence where my own position may lie (Carney, 2016). From an ethnographic point of view, FEIs are their own microcosms of society and as such have their own accepted culture and practices that develop within it (Palaiologou et al., 2016). My position as researcher also meant I was situated within the milieu of the college with shared meanings which are illustrated in Figure 2, page 88. The possible 'double bind' of this situation is that my bias as a member of the institution can also mean access to privileged information and being able to understand the language of the people who move within it (Long et al., 2003). In the context of research there is also the advantage that the depth of questioning about HE in

FE student experiences may only be possible because of my own knowledge about Northsall (Le Gallais, 2008).

During the pilot study, I changed employment, from Northsall to a position in a local Higher Education Institution. Although Hellawell (2006) argues that being an insider is central to effective insider research, the change to outsider gave a new perspective to the research. This is because it is difficult to be completely objective when considering an issue, which has been significant to a large part of one's professional life, but the perspective of a new role facilitated greater clarity. Complete objectivity is not always necessary, as Hammersley (2007:65) suggests, the researcher can be '*value relevant*' which suggests that self-interest can sometimes facilitate identification of suitable subjects for research.

There were ramifications to leaving the employment of Northsall. Relationships, formed previously, tended to facilitate access to participants only when visiting, which is more time consuming than being based permanently at that institution. However, some former students may have been more willing to speak to a researcher who was external to Northsall and reveal any negative associations they may have had with it.

The experience of becoming an outsider, having moved to other employment, left the feeling that conducting research in a past institution could feel fraudulent, that the currency of understanding was less reliable than it had been. However, this was precariously balanced with an ability to step back in a way that had been less possible previously, as I now started to gain the perspective of an outsider. This seems to be the opposite process to that described by Le Gallais (2008) who began to experience a shift to

insider within an institution in which she had never been employed: a process described by Schutz (1976:67) as the phenomenon of, 'going native'. However, she also notes a shift back to outsider towards the end, which raises the possibility that there would have been a feeling of disengagement from Northsall, at least in terms of the research, if I had maintained employment there throughout. I think any loyalty felt towards the research lies with the students, rather than the institution, and in that case a genuine desire to accurately reflect their experiences. Students can be a disempowered group within the marketised education system, and it is my intention in this research, to give them a voice. This was demonstrated by never feeling the need to take ownership of how Northsall operated by applying the pronoun 'we' to whatever practice was uncovered (Le Gallais, 2008). I think this is positive and supports my aim to be personally reflexive in conducting the research and presenting the perspectives of the participants.

The validity of the research will be based on how far the results and conclusions reflect the individual experiences of those who have been interviewed. This is the fundamental position of a qualitative approach and will support answering both Research Questions 1 and 2 which concern both the reasons students give for dropping out of their studies and the role resilience may play within that decision, as considered from the participants' perspectives. Both data collection methods and the development of the data themes, through the literature review and participant responses, are needed to support an interpretivist perspective. A number of possible research methods were selected and assessed for suitability.

3.4 Possible research methods

The research method selected needed to be suitable for the interpretivist perspective.

That meant, flexible enough to allow for participant responses and also encourage them to provide additional information. A number of possible data collection methods were considered which might have supported this approach.

3.4.1 Focus groups

Focus groups are like group interviews and could have been considered to provide general information about the issues around the research questions, in much the same way as semi structured interviews (Palaiologou et al., 2016). The problem is that the ex-student participants who form the majority of those targeted for this research are reluctant to respond and are not accessible and may not be willing or available for such an approach. Additionally, a focus group may also be intimidating to some participants who then do not feel they can speak freely about their own experiences in that social context (Hollander, 2004). Focus groups can create their own dynamics, as individuals may be influenced by the suggestions and comments of others, and it could constrain their responses (Morgan, 1997).

3.4.2 Observations

Observation, as a research method, involves a unique opportunity to gather 'live' data from naturally occurring social situations (Cohen et al., 2011). Information such as nonverbal communication, interaction between individuals, and environmental and organisational details can also be observed and included in the research data either written up separately as commentary or included in the observation notes (Cohen et al.,

2011). Unfortunately, observation, as a method, would only be relevant if those students at risk of leaving could accurately be identified before they left; this difficulty means this method is not suitable for this research. It would not have allowed for insider accounts and experiences to investigate adequately reasons behind decisions to withdraw from the course.

3.4.3 Questionnaires

One of the main advantages of questionnaires is their adaptability to both quantitative and qualitative responses. Results can also usually be relatively easily compared due to their more uniform structure, particularly when there are some closed questions.

Questionnaires can also provide the opportunity for anonymous participation by facilitating distance between the researcher and subject that may allow for more authentic responses. They also provide good breadth by enabling a greater number of participants to be surveyed, as well as the opportunity for a greater number of questions to be asked, but this is at the cost of depth, which is important in a qualitative study (Connolly in Palaiologou, 2016). The research needed to allow some themes to emerge from the participants' responses, rather than being completely pre-planned and therefore required greater flexibility than questionnaires allow.

There are also disadvantages to questionnaires as a research method because response rates tend to be low. This could be due to the current social climate of survey overload, as so many commercial organisations require feedback questionnaires, which could lead to response fatigue. Sax et al. (2003) suggest the use of questionnaires has decreased within student populations who tend to be particularly heavily surveyed. Web-based

questionnaires have the inbuilt bias of excluding those with no access to the internet (Goree and Marszalek, 1995). However, this is an older study and less likely to be the case now, since the proliferation of internet enabled devices such as smart phones. The depth of response from questionnaires is limited and there is no opportunity for the researcher to follow up any misunderstanding or opportunity for amplification of responses (Cohen et al. 2011). Questionnaires tend to be answered out of wanting to achieve social acceptability. In the case of this research, it is unlikely that ex-students would be concerned about approval from Northsall (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

Therefore, focus groups, observations, and questionnaires seemed to be less appropriate to capturing individual ex-student's accounts of their experiences. The ultimate choice of method was determined by the research questions that suited a qualitative approach, in which the participants describe their own experiences of learning (Miller and Glassner, 1997). This would be facilitated by employing a semi structured interview approach, to enable the discovery of the students' and staffs' own views of their learning and relationship experiences within the FE college environment.

3.5 The case for semi structured interviews

The semi-structured interview was to draw qualitative information from the participants, which would give rich data within the theoretical framework of an anti-positivist approach to gain insight and understanding from the individual participant (Gillman, 2000). The semi structured interview employs themed, open questions to provide some structure and consistency between interviews, and prompts towards the relevant subject areas (Bell, 2010). The participant can use their words to frame their own understanding in the

responses they give and allows them to lead the researcher to their own lived realities (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Therefore, it is an effective way of gathering information about, not just participant's opinions, but also their circumstances. This allows for an in-depth exploration of their experiences, motivations and how they rationalise these within their current context (Drever, 1995). It is ideally suited to an interpretivist approach because it can inform the researcher's deconstruction of the accounts of interviewees at the level of the thematic analysis, which is described later. It allows for exploration around the research subjects and means their experiences will underpin both the direction of the research and the conclusions (Charmaz, 2006).

Utilising a relatively unstructured approach should allow participants to be more relaxed and therefore more likely to answer honestly (Clough, 2002). This may be dependent on the researcher's ability to establish a relationship, however temporary, with the interviewee via trust and empathy (Opie, 2004; Cahill, 2007). As a method, it offers flexibility, as it facilitates a schedule as well as the opportunity to follow up any points of interest offered by the interviewee and can be the most appropriate type of research for an interpretivist perspective (Thomas and Harden, 2007).

A semi structured interview seemed to be the most appropriate choice of method for this study, because of the flexibility it offers the researcher, with the opportunity to prompt discussion of relevant information from open questions and allow the participant to enlarge upon them, to explore their own experiences more fully (Drever, 1995).

3.6 Conducting the research

Northsall's data for students withdrawing from HE courses of one year or more for the academic years between 2010 -11 and 2013-14 is an average of 17 per cent of the overall cohort who enrolled (Northsall MIS, 2013-14, Appendix 1). National figures for non-continuation rates in HE for low participation areas in the UK which are just over 8 per cent in 2014-15 and just under 6 per cent in other areas, and these have changed little since 2009/10 and represent a significant number of students (SMF, 2016).

Data are only available retrospectively at least beyond the completion of an academic year. This is because many student completions may occur beyond their initial year of study for a variety of reasons such as returning from suspension, or learning goals longer than a year in duration. It is extremely difficult to get detailed institutional data unless employed at the institution concerned, and Ofsted reports, for example, tend to only include selected data sets. The research seeks to uncover, through HE in FE students' own accounts, the reasons for their failure to be retained and the possible role which resilience could play.

3.6.1 Learning from the pilot study

In the pilot study two staff and one student were interviewed. There were also three questionnaire responses via Survey Monkey software. It became apparent that persuading students who had left Northsall to engage with a research study was extremely difficult. Most had worked hard to focus their lives away from their college experience into different careers or courses and some of the original contact details were out of date. The initial research method of semi structured interviews had to be adapted to include an on-line survey version to ensure an adequate sample. This resulted in a sample that was

limited to three participants of which only one resulted in a full semi structured interview. Some replies to an online 'survey monkey' were obtained but the response rate was only 3 out of a possible 250 possible participants. This paucity of data was supplemented by interviewing two staff involved in teaching and support of HE in FE students. It was hoped that they would be able to draw on their experience within FEIs to empathise with students who struggled and subsequently left their courses.

If the sample size of students had been too small to be reliable in the main study, there were two other possible methods, already used in the pilot study, which could have been employed. The first was to include further interviews with tutors about the reasons why students withdrew. This could offer a different perspective on institutional issues with the opportunity to triangulate with the ex-student responses (Denscombe, 2010). The second would have been to repeat the use of software known as "SurveyMonkey" as an on-line questionnaire. In the pilot study only three participants responded to this survey and there may have been problems with obtaining a good enough response rate to be reliable. Questionnaires were not used in the main study because of the far better response rate to the Student Services Officer enabled interviews which provide far richer data and can draw individual stories from the student participants.

The use of an intermediary developed from a conversation between the researcher and the Student Services Officer (SSO) at Northsall. We discussed the close relationship they had formed with many of the students who leave. They agreed to make the initial contact with ex-students, because they would be hearing a familiar, and possibly trusted, voice and could then feel able to respond to an invitation to take part in the research. The interviews

were successfully obtained through a series of appointments with the SSO over a period of two weeks in the summer of 2017 and a further appointment with the SSO two months later.

The use of the Student Services Officer as an intermediary represented a change in the research procedure since the pilot study. The adoption of this approach is potentially novel within educational research and further examination of both the role of the SSO in HE in FE and the efficacy of their use as an intermediary seemed to merit further attention.

3.6.2 The role of Student Services Officers

As reductions have taken place due to funding constraints within the FE sector, increasingly tutors have found they have more extensive duties to perform which has left them with less time to devote to individual support for students (Smith, 2015). This seems to have led to the development of a non-teaching staff role within further and higher education institutions whose job focuses on individualised support of students. This role, I have called 'Student Services Officers' (SSO) in the research, is often wide ranging and can include some academic advice, course liaison and advice about financial concerns such as fees and student loans and pastoral support. They can also mediate between students and other staff or departments within HE departments in GFEs, as well as signposting to services external to the college. Appendix 7 gives an indication of many of Northsall's SSO's places of referral. Similar roles were sought out in two other local colleges to obtain participants for the study.

In the years since 2010 especially, when the ability of tutors to form a relationship with students has been reduced due to funding constraints on their time, the role of the SSO can be critical in supporting students who are at risk of leaving (Gill, 2016). This is because a relationship with a tutor or another available member of staff, such as an SSO, can mitigate some of the dissonance a marketised student may feel when confronted with the reality of their limited ability to influence how much support they can receive from, college resources, in particular, tutors (Tomlinson, 2014). SSO support for students can extend their resilience and ensure they complete their HE in FE course.

3.6.3 Student Services Officer as intermediary in the research

Securing the co-operation of such a difficult-to-contact cohort cannot be underestimated; the reliability and the credibility of the research rested on securing individual accounts of why students had left Northsall. The research on hard-to-reach research populations tended to recommend internet-based research methods (Kayrouz et al., 2014).

I was in a privileged position following some years of working together and building trust with the SSO at Northsall. In most cases, SSOs are involved from an early to late stage in learners' decision making about leaving their course. The students had varying levels of involvement and support so the SSO knew most of them. Although some research participants could be regarded as co-researchers, the SSO at Northsall was both a participant and an intermediary (Moustakas, 1994). However, they were not a co-researcher as they did not '*...create the textual, structural and textural-structural narratives...*' (Yuksel and Yildirim, 2015:8). Neither were they a 'gatekeeper' but a trusted and confidential facilitator. As such, they were able to promote and support the collecting

of data and enabled access to ex-students. In this context, an enabling intermediary is really the opposite of a gatekeeper who might seek to restrict access to participants (Burton et al., 2008).

The closeness of the Student Services Officer at Northsall to the research, whilst opening up opportunities was also a possible concern. Their collaboration demonstrated a bias towards supporting both myself and the research. I was treated very much as an ‘insider’ in my dealings with them (Le Gallais, 2008). This meant I needed to increase my own self awareness and understanding of both my own current role as a researcher and my past role as a colleague of the SSO. The separation of these two roles was an important aspect of the reflexivity required in order to carry out this research with integrity, validity and reliability. Dwyer and Buckle (2009:59) presented a possible way through the problem:

‘...the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one’s research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience.’

As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggest, I actively strived against our relationship influencing the outcomes of the research because it was in both our interests that it did not. The SSO was committed to the validity of the findings as they wanted answers about why HE in FE students are not being retained as much as I do. The way in which this was guarded against is described in the following two paragraphs.

The SSO at Northsall’s involvement in the research could have manifested itself as ‘demand characteristics’. That is, seeking out ex-student participants who would simply validate either her own or my views about what the reasons for student drop out on HE in

FE programmes were likely to be (Denscombe, 2010). The solution to addressing this can be categorised as what Palaiologou et al., (2016: 159) suggests as part of researching, which may throw up unexpected situations:

...the complexity of the context being investigated and your understanding of that context and multiple realities collected ...may help you to be aware of what is appropriate to answer research questions...

It is this unexpected dimension to the research, my relationship with the SSO, which afforded consideration of the 'multiple realities' within both the college culture and the research. This was mitigated as much as possible, by ensuring that the selection of ex-students was systematic and self-selecting as they had to agree to take part following the telephone contact and invitation. By asking the questions myself, I excluded the possibility of the SSO being able to lead the participants' answers. Any possibility of influencing the participants was confined to myself and as I did not have any prior history in supporting them and building a relationship, so the ability for the SSO to influence them was reduced.

The Student Services Officer could have influenced the study by collusion with me about the outcome of the interviews. She could have tried to seek proof for her own perspective through her influence on either the outcomes of the research (reviewing the transcripts) or by her suggestions to me either within the interviews conducted or outside of them, informally. This was addressed through my not amending any discussion as a result of further comments made, only noting any possible inaccuracies to transcripts. Triangulating Northsall's SSO's contributions, further interviews were held with two other SSOs at other institutions, as well as three teaching staff providing additional perspectives, which may either support or refute the SSO at Northsall's own views (Denscombe, 2010). It was

important in objective research to strive to ensure as much separation between personal experience as fact or opinion which is potentially, *'inward looking and self-justifying'* and which may threaten the overall credibility of the research (Jones, 1985:45). The validity of this interpretivist research was maintained, in a manner similar to Fitzpatrick, (2019) by ensuring conclusions about the participant responses were reached through careful consideration of the data against the literature and ensuring viewpoints such as the SSOs remaining outside of data presentation, in order to maintain the trustworthiness of the research. A way to guard against my own bias was to use the primary data to guide any conclusions and let participants speak for themselves through their own words. The reader can then assess the extent to which the research has achieved a separation between my own professional values and objectivity in conducting the research (Le Gallais, 2008).

3.6.4 The validity of non-student participant narratives

The ex-students' stories will provide the most valid way of understanding the reasons why HE in FE students are not retained on their degree programmes. I have tried to adopt an approach to triangulation that does not directly weigh one set of voices against another. Rather, that I, as the researcher, is the central point. Given the difficulty of access to withdrawn students, I have tried to use the accounts of non-students to set what discourses are around and consider the possible effects they might have on withdrawing students.

The SSO's contribution is valuable as a mediator between staff and students. They have a different perspective to that of staff who teach. They are employed by the college and can understand some of the teaching staff perspectives and the possible pressures they are

subject to from the wider college accountability measures (Smith, 2015). Indeed, in the study, two of the three SSOs had current or past teaching roles, so they had first-hand experience of both academic and pastoral care for HE in FE students. As they tend to be managed outside of the immediate department in which they are located, they may also have awareness of institutional wide concerns, which may be impacting the HE in FE student experience.

It is important to understand some of the varying dependencies upon the dimensions to the execution of the role of tutors; that is; academic, pastoral and also partly administrative. It is difficult to make suggestions for practice about educational practitioners who have not been consulted. As Hammersley (2007:77) suggests, *'Teachers engage in educational research and not simply with it'*. The staff participants may offer more insight than the student's initial impressions of a situation may suggest. For example, not receiving what students view as sufficient support from tutors may be better understood with reference to how the tutor's time is allocated (Smith, 2015; Sperlinger et al., 2018). They are the ones who can explain how educational practice may be influenced by Governmental policy changes, to enable a deeper understanding of the reasons why students withdraw (Gleeson, 2005). In order to ensure the credibility of the findings of the research they need to be involved as partners in the research and that is why participants have been included who represent both teaching and non-teaching staff perspectives (Palaiologou, 2016). This also comes with caution as there is potential difficulty with placing different sets of voices against each other, and the issues raised by staff perspectives on student problems. This has been guarded against by presenting student voices first, whenever possible.

The next stage in the research was to design and implement a suitable procedure for interviewing the research subjects, using the Northsall SSO as an intermediary. The staff and SSOs were mainly interviewed in person, with the exception of one SSO who, like the ex-student participants, was also through a telephone interview due to their distance and availability. The research decisions made will now be described, followed by the procedure used, which was informed by the pilot study.

3.6.5 The sample

From the pilot study, the role of the SSO became of interest and significance to the research as an actor with a key mediation role in the withdrawal process. This developed into additional data collection from two other SSOs in local colleges who provide HE courses. This was partly to provide further insight into their role but also to ensure Northsall's SSO information was further anonymised and supported through the inclusion of further participants who are in comparable professional roles. Although two of the three SSOs interviewed were also teachers, one currently and one in the last three years, three current teaching staff within Northsall were also interviewed to get their perspectives.

The teaching staff participants all teach on the HE in FE provision in Northsall and they were selected from an appeal for volunteers at an all-staff meeting. One has a leadership role, and two teach on different degree level programmes. Of the teaching staff participants, one came from faculty A and two from faculty B. They represent a range of teaching and course experience (See Appendix 9 for pen portraits). The Northsall SSO works across the two HE faculties and the ex-student participants were equally divided

between the two faculties, so the participant sample overall is representative of experiences across the HE in FE provision at Northsall.

The names of ex-student participants were taken from Northsall systems data for the academic year 2016-17 from the HE provision within Northsall. Some 616 students enrolled within Faculty A and 564 in Faculty B. In this year 1180 students started an HE course in Northsall. During the year 63 left, 10 of whom provided interviews. The final sample consisted of five students out of 29 from faculty A and five students out of 34 from faculty B. The split was a fortunate one in terms of being representative of the subject areas and therefore possibly the HE student population generally at Northsall. This made it a purposive sample. Initially, interviews were secured with eight students from the sampling frame. This is a high response rate, amounting to around 12 per cent of the students who withdrew that year and 0.6 per cent of Northsall's HE student population.

Everyone in the initial sampling frame of 63 former students was contacted, except for four, two from each faculty. This was because the SSO knew the circumstances in which they had left and felt it could be antagonistic for anyone who appeared to represent Northsall to contact them. The remaining 59 students all had an equal chance of participating in the telephone interviews. To offset the possible bias of calling at a specific time, any who did not reply were re-called on a further occasion and at a different time later in the week or the following week. There were five students whom, upon calling, were unavailable. In these cases, a follow up email gave an invitation to participate and a subsequent phone call to support this, was made three weeks later. No students actually took up these subsequent invitations, which reinforces the belief that it was their

relationship with the SSO and her initial approach, which secured the agreement of participants to take part in the research. This initially yielded eight student interviews.

There was further data collection two months later, after the start of a new academic year. This focussed on 'non- returners'; students who completed the first year of a foundation degree programme but did not return for the second year and had effectively left their studies. This sampling frame was very small, only 5 students, but surprisingly two of them agreed to be interviewed. This could have been because these students had only very recently left.

3.6.6 The interview procedure

The interview questions in the main study were revised so that they were fewer in number than the pilot study (see Appendix 5) but still addressed the research questions. This meant the time commitment on the part of the participant would be less and the incentive to participate could be greater. For the first contact with an ex-student, the SSO called and spoke first. The researcher then took over and immediately explained the research to the participant and secured their agreement for a recorded interview. In all cases the research was explained immediately to the participant and their agreement to the audio recording obtained. All ten interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed in this way over a period of five months between June and October in 2017.

The procedure for staff participants interviewed in person was as close to the procedure for interviews by telephone as possible. The only difference being that the staff participants could be contacted in advance, so they were offered a copy of the questions

before the interview. Securing consent followed an explanation of the research and then similar questions were asked of all staff and all students (See Appendix 5). The other two SSO participants were secured through professional contacts at those FEIs. This made a total of three support staff participants, in addition to the three teaching staff participants. In total, 16 interviews were conducted either by telephone or in person.

Recording information in an unstructured interview can be problematic. Writing down what interviewees say can be difficult to do accurately and can also be intrusive. Audio recordings and transcriptions are much easier, but also involve resolving the issue of confidentiality, which may inhibit interviewees. The sheer volume of information from recordings can also be a disadvantage and require time to transcribe (Hammersley et al., 2001). Despite these shortcomings, the advantages of using a method which includes the ability to conduct the interview easily by telephone or video recording and had the advantage of taking a relatively short period of time, meant interviewees were more likely to agree to participate. This also meant all participants could speak freely without interruptions; note taking would have to be completed and checked for accuracy by sharing with the interviewee, creating additional intrusion. Therefore, this was the approach taken by the research and was effective in ensuring as accurate account as possible of the participants' responses.

Without observation, what the interviewee says cannot be completely verified. As what they would really do in a given situation, without the filter of their own perception and remembrance of the event, may be different to their later account of their actions and motivations. This has been addressed, to some extent, via the semi structured nature of

the interview, which allows for as much exploration of participant responses as possible (Hammersley, 2007). There was also some participant checking which is discussed in the next section.

The interviews provided good response rates because they involved a captive audience, once they had agreed to participate. However, during the interviews, participants could decide they would rather not have volunteered, and this may lead to responses which are less reliable. This can be addressed by being more rigorous in ensuring as much objectivity as possible, in order to maximise outcomes of both conducting the interviews and evaluating the findings (Hammersley, 2007). This was important in the context of a qualitative study as it was intended to get as close as possible to the individual participants' experiences and feelings.

The next stage in the research was to transcribe the semi structured interviews from the audio recordings, check their reliability, and then begin a thematic analysis.

3.6.7 Participant Checking

Teaching and support staff participants were invited to feedback on the transcriptions produced from their interviews. The teaching staff participants and Northsall's SSO did agree to do this, as did the SSO at one of the other two colleges. The other SSO was in the process of changing job role and declined to check the transcript due to time pressures.

The former students were also offered the opportunity to be involved in the research further by checking their interview transcripts. One student in the pilot study was willing to

do this, but in the main study all student participants refused this offer. The offer was made during the interviews with the ex-students as they always ended with further reference to the SSO who had acted as intermediary. It was also suggested that the SSO could be used to both discuss any remaining issues to do with their course or re-joining study. It was also a way to contact the researcher should they wish to withdraw from the study or to change their mind about checking their transcript. All the participants had relationships with the SSO and knew how to make contact as well as being assured of approachability. It seems a feature of hard-to-reach cohorts that encouraging engagement in the research beyond initial participation is likely to be as difficult as initial involvement. This has possible implications for any future research into this cohort of participants. In the absence of student checking of transcripts, transcribing needed to be done rigorously and was checked by both Northsall's SSO as well as a colleague of the researcher who was not involved in the research.

3.7 Analysing the data

The next stage in the research was to analyse the content of the transcript data by means of a thematic analysis.

3.7.1 Thematic analysis

In this method, data are collected as prose before being thematically analysed. This analysis indicates incidences of occurrence or mention of an issue and therefore categories of response are extracted (Cohen et al., 2011). This allows for the identification of themes, which will eventually support the formulation of responses to the research questions (Scott, 2017). The choice of thematic analysis to interrogate the data seemed to naturally

follow from the semi structured nature of the interviews and seems a particularly appropriate choice for qualitative data and themes which, once emerged, were used to develop the theory (Thomas and Harden, 2007). Initially, themes were identified from the literature, incidences of these themes were highlighted in the transcripts in a process Palaiologou et al. (2016:179) refers to as, '*open coding*' and what Silverman (2011:62) terms '*a priori*' codes. The next step was to identify any new and recurrent themes, which were not initially suggested by the literature; these were identified as '*emergent*' codes (Silverman, 2011:62). The intention was that data was used to discover the insider accounts with minimal initial preconceptions.

There is a danger inherent within this process that the researcher is, in effect, '*turning qualitative data into quantitative data*' (Ryan and Bernard, 2000:777). This was guarded against, as far as possible, by keeping to a small number of broad themes for the research questions as well as the findings and discussion. Palaiologou (2016) suggests that a possible solution to mitigate, if not eliminate any potential bias from the imposition of themes by the researcher, is to check the results with the participants. Although this was not possible with the student participants, it was completed with some of the staff, as described in the previous section.

In the pilot study, the researcher used a software package known as Nvivo. It was efficient at selecting key words and phrases for frequency, but it meant losing some familiarity with the primary data. Therefore, in the main study, the thematic analysis was conducted manually. The system, which was adopted started with the approach suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994:9). It started by looking for reference to the themes that were

identified within the literature review and using them as key words or phrases, such as 'resilience', 'funding,' 'expectations'. This yielded some initial results through using a variety of colours to highlight words or phrases against these key themes. However, it is also important to recognise that participants do not always use the same terminology for similar themes. For example, 'widening participation' might appear in the participant transcripts as a discussion about the needs of mature or part- time students; or may only make vague reference to 'family responsibilities'. The relevance to WP may only become apparent later in the transcription as they apply comments to their own or other's situations and circumstances. This was the painstaking part as each transcript was read carefully to ensure that all relevant information, which relates to a particular topic is captured with highlighted themes. As Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest, there was some employment of notes in the margin or on separate documentation to note any variance from the initially identified themes.

The themes were then transferred to a table (examples can be found in Appendix 8) and key quotes to support them were added from the transcripts and placed on the table in rows. The same process was conducted upon all the participant groups' transcripts' so that the table produced had themes in one column and relevant quotes next to them in another.

From this table, the list of generalised themes could then be evaluated against the literature and also enabled further reading and consideration of any emerging themes. In the event, no new themes emerged. From these themes, a thesis was developed. Initial data and pen portraits for the participants are available in Appendices 8 and 9.

The ex-student participants had already left their HE in FE studies so their decision to leave could mean they are potentially vulnerable to confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). This will be considered in the next section.

3.7.2 Confirmation bias

Confirmation bias is the tendency for individuals to report past or current actions as supporting or even confirming existing attitudes or values (Nickerson, 1998; Rozin and Royzman, 2001). In the context of this research, it means that ex-student participants may be more negative about their Higher Education in Further Education experiences at Northsall in order to justify their decision to leave (Nickerson, 1998; Rozin and Royzman, 2001). They may also blame themselves for not being able to stay and complete the course. It is important to take this into account when considering the ways in which the students talk about their learning journey experiences. As the ex-student participants themselves reported:

I feel a bit of a failure, but the cons were outweighing the pros. I took into consideration that maybe I could come out, reflect (Kane)

It wasn't it wasn't time to do it right now (Ellie)

If I hadn't had to deal with all that [mental ill health] I would still be there, and I would be doing my work (Gill).

It is hard to know whether they were being realistic in their assessment of their own inability to overcome their problems and continue study. What is certain is that when looking back, they still feel that their decision to enrol on a Higher Education in Further Education degree course was the right one at the time.

The staff participants may also try to frame their responses in such a way as to support their own, pre-existing, beliefs about why students leave their HE in FE courses. The SSOs themselves may have a confirmation bias regarding the effectiveness of their role (Nickerson, 1998). They may also not want to appear to be critical of their college management (Unwin in Derrick et al., 2010). It is important to be alert to confirmation bias, but it can also be seen as a potential source of evidence, for example of the impact of neoliberalism on HE in FE, as was possibly the case with tutors Stella and Dee and SSO Sally. They seemed to take greater personal responsibility for their students' retention and recognise the need to adapt their own behaviour and offer a lot of pastoral care. This could mean they are simply trying to comply with the business culture of the college in attempting to meet targets for retention which may not be achievable within the current reduced funding regimes (Smith, 2015). SSO Mike, as an FE manager was trying to make ethical decisions about staff deployment and student resourcing in situations in which there seems to be simply not enough funding to go around. His loyalty as a manager was likely to be towards the ethos of senior management at his college (Armingeon and Bonoli, 2006). He may find this more stressful as someone who also teaches and is interested in the student experience but is also aware of his own management position as different from teaching staff in terms of funding priorities, and his experiences which could be seen as at the front line of the dissonance between neoliberalised and collectivist approaches to administering Higher Education (Deem, 2011).

The way to mitigate the effects of confirmation bias is to look for evidence in the primary and secondary data. Individual assertions by staff or students about the reasons why students fail to be retained on their HE in FE programmes will be far more compelling if

there is triangulated evidence from either other participants within the study or from secondary research.

3.7.3 Limitations of the methods

The research has a number of possible limitations. The use of trusted intermediaries as a way to facilitate access to hard-to-reach participants enabled the experiences of students who had left Further Education in Higher Education courses to be explored authentically. A limitation of using an intermediary is that some control is lost over the way the research is conducted. Although the SSO's telephone invitation was agreed, it was not scripted because it depended on her knowledge and relationship with the ex-student to secure their cooperation. If her approach was identical and constrained, the student may not have felt at ease with the request and the response may have been lower. However, a further limitation is that it was not possible to interview students who may have had a negative experience of student services. It is possible that the cohort is limited to those who felt they had a positive relationship with the SSO.

The research, which is carried out by someone with partial 'insider' status may be subject to bias, however well that has been guarded against (Jones, 1985). The student participants were contacted by someone they knew, and it could be that they felt obligated to participate in the research because of their relationship with the SSO. This perceived coercion could have influenced their responses, either positively as demand characteristics, or negatively as they felt resentful about being contacted (Denscombe, 2010). This was mitigated against by starting the interview with reassurances, from myself, that they were under no obligation to participate. It ended with an open invitation to

contact the SSO with regard to any further issues, including re-joining their course or withdrawing their data from the research.

A fuller discussion of the potential generalisability of this small-scale study is included in section 3.3.3. The research can only offer a snapshot of the experiences of students at Northsall, during the period in which the research was taking place. Research based on the experiences of Higher Education students in Further Education colleges, whether in the past, future or at different colleges may produce different outcomes. Gaining insight into student experiences through systematic study can inform practices and approaches not only in one college but possibly in others, providing current local circumstances are considered. It can create a set of outcomes against which other colleges can self-assess to help them address similar, rather than identical, questions about preventing student drop out. As there is little research into, HE in FE student retention, this research recommends further studies.

The research was conducted, and the sixteen staff and student interviews were transcribed and analysed as described in this chapter. The next step was to use the transcript thematic analysis to identify findings and evaluate them against the literature, in order to address RQs 1 and 2.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This chapter outlines the research findings and will follow the three overarching themes identified in the literature review in order to address the first two research questions: 1: *‘What reasons do students give for leaving their course before completion?’* and 2: *‘How important is resilience to student retention at HE level?’*. The first factor influencing resilience is those individual to the student, such as their personality, physical and mental health (Fowler et al., 2014). The second is institutional factors on a HE in FE student’s learning journey, such as student experiences of teaching and learning (Illeris, 2017). The last is the policy context, which includes marketisation, funding and student expectations (Maringe, 2006; Nixon et al., 2018). The sub themes within each of these will also be explored, where they have been significant within the participant responses, about the reasons the students gave for leaving their course before completion. It will also examine how important and helpful the concept of resilience is to student retention at HE level study in a FEI, whilst recognising that it may be open to misuse (Canavan, 2007). The findings and discussion reflect the voices of the former student participants and staff about the reasons they gave about why HE in FE students withdraw from their programmes.

The former student participant responses will be indicated by their pseudonym only, but staff participants’ names will have the prefix ‘Tutor’ or ‘SSO’ as appropriate. For some themes, it may be the case that one group of participants has responded disproportionately more than the others. Whenever possible, student responses have been prioritised. However, this can mean that staff appear to have the last word. This is not intentional and simply the result of having to assign an order to participant data which

seems most relevant to the subject under discussion. An overview of the participants who agreed to provide information for the study is included in Appendix 8, table A, in order to increase the reader's understanding of the primary data. Tables B, C, D and E are summaries of some of the themes in the staff interviews which emerged at a later stage of the thematic analysis process. Appendix 9 is a collection of pen portraits of each of the participants in the study. College records revealed that six of the student participants were aged 18-25. Throughout the discussion of findings, students over 25 years will be referred to as 'older' and those who are 18-25 will be referred to as 'younger' participants. The staff participants often use the term 'mature' which refers to anyone over 19.

In the first section, attention will be focussed on the first overarching theme from the literature review, which considers the student as an individual and the way in which their own resilience is affected by personality and life events; all of which may impact on their ability to be resilient and avoid dropping out of their HE in FE studies.

4.1 Individual resilience and retention

Higher Education students begin their studies having achieved at least a level 3 qualification and thereby demonstrated some ability to overcome any barriers to study they encounter (Rutter, 2012). The student's background may continue to have an impact on how they experience Higher Education in Further Education throughout their study (Reay et al., 2001a). This is particularly true of the large WP cohort at Northsall. Students drop out when personality issues and poor resilience combine with other stressors in the student's life and may lead to them leaving (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Gill, 2016).

Resilience itself will be considered first as a theme which has the potential to impact most broadly across the HE in FE student's experience.

4.1.1 Resilience

This quote from Lana seems to sum up the attitude of all the former student participants to their course and their ability to be resilient against the various issues they have faced:

I would really like to finish [the course]. I just couldn't do it... (Lana)

Resilience is the ability to manage oneself and therefore make appropriate adjustment to the environment to still be effective in whatever endeavour is currently being undertaken (Florez, 2011). Resilience is best viewed as a concept which is not fixed but elastic and depends upon a number of factors. Firstly, the pre-existing ability of the student to be resilient; as well as how many and how serious the stressors are within their course and in their personal lives. It is also important to note that resilience can also be understood as a concept which is open to misuse by encouraging the extension of an individual's effort beyond that which is healthy or desirable for them (Canavan, 2007; Garrett, 2015).

Good personal resilience has been postulated as being either innate or learned (Robertson, 2012; Luther in VicHealth, 2015). The student participants did not mention resilience but Tutor Martin's and SSO Sally's views of resilience as a commodity, were expressed:

I don't think many of them [students] are [resilient] to be honest. I think if they are, they are the ones who do really well. (Tutor Martin)

...If they want to do it [the course] they'll do it....if stuff does happen, then they've got that innate ability to try and be organised whatever life throws at them. (SSO Sally)

If this were true, it means there is limited ability for staff at the college to influence resilience (Luther in VicHealth, 2015). Conversely, SSO June seems to be saying resilience can be developed, but only through experiences external rather than internal to FE colleges:

Come back having your life experience after two years... maybe then having developed the resilience you require to succeed to the best of your ability. (SSO June)

Tutor Dee seems to see resilience as influenced by a supportive environment and, in contrast to SSO June, as being able to develop within a course through the tutor's ability to support and manage students to build resilience (Schunk and Zimmerman, 2008:17). She suggests:

...their [the student's] resilience very much depends on their integration in the class. Their acceptance by other students in the classroom and my support as a tutor. (Tutor Dee)

The role of the tutor, which seems critical here, in supporting and building resilience in HE in FE students will be explored later in the discussion.

4.1.2 Overstretching resilience and the decision to leave.

There seems to be an identifiable period immediately before the conscious decision to leave has been taken, in which the student is experiencing stress to their resilience but has not yet left the college. The student participants described it in terms of there being a 'problem' or 'difficulty'. These are the kind of words that are used by half of the participants:

I had difficulties since the beginning.... (Valentina)

I was still doing the work and turning up; it's just that at times it was difficult (Lana)

I was having difficulties on this course and in my own life as well (Karla)

The next stage of resilience, after recognising there is a problem that needs adjustment, is being able to make that adjustment (Robertson, 2012):

*I'm very conscientious and I've got an assignment to do and I don't want to give up.
(Julia)*

This leads to the consideration of whether anything can be done for students at this point.

Park et al. (2011) suggest timely intervention when student disengagement is identified:

I think it was a mixture of both the stress from the course and the PTSD, so I thought it was best to pull out (Kane)

It was just a lot of personal issues, my health and stuff meant I just couldn't do it which is frustrating because I would really like to finish it (Lana)

Personalities cope differentially with stress (Korte et al., 2005). It is also difficult to

resource support for students to harness and enhance their own efforts at this point:

For some people at 18 they are very resilient but it's really about tailoring to each person and I don't know how we do that and that's very labour intensive. (SSO June)

This is particularly so if the student does not know whether they are going to have a problem and therefore what help they may need:

My illness is up and down every day. So, meeting things was quite difficult cos it's unpredictable. (Ellie)

A feature of this concerted effort when the student is attempting to recover any perceived or lost academic ground, is that they seem to reach a pinch point. This is where they begin the process of disengagement and the absences this usually entails are initiated

(O'Donnell, 2009). By this point, Julia and Jake seem at the 'acceptance' stage of Kubler-Ross's (1969) loss cycle:

I tried to hold it together, but I couldn't, I thought, do you know, I'm just going to have to let it go. (Julia)

Look I'm trying to keep up, and then it just got to the point where I said to them [tutors], enough's enough, I can't do this (Jake)

Immediate intervention to resolve acute student issues was not generally a topic that concerned students, and none commented upon it, but there is some indication in what the students said:

From day one, unable to access my IT and the library, from the first period I seemed to be having trouble. (Leah)

I'd told her [the tutor] my problems and it got to the point where I felt like she just wasn't listening. (Gill)

For Gill and Leah, college interventions were not timely enough to prevent them leaving (Park et al., 2011). Their perception of the difficulties they encountered were that they were unsurmountable. The objectivity of this assessment is difficult to assess. Tutor Dee notes this when she says:

There are a lot of things that are out of our control that impact on the students and it could simply be moving from one building to another ...and students did leave because they didn't like this building (Tutor Dee)

Gill's assertion about her tutor being the first point of contact for support is important. When contact is not available, a supportive relationship outside of teaching can mitigate both college and tutor weakness. Tutor Dee herself suggested this when she continued to say:

Since I have been really harsh with myself and reflected and I believe a lot of it [student reported difficulty] is to do with the tutors. (Tutor Dee)

Douglas et al. (2015) suggests, it can be just one overwhelming issue or circumstance which tips the balance of enablers against stressors in the student's life (Hedberg and Tone, 2014),

'My health and stuff meant I just couldn't do it which is frustrating' (Lana)

Lana believed that under different circumstances she could have completed her course. This runs contrary to Gilborn and Mirza's (2000) expectation that WP students who drop out joined the course with poor innate resilience.

The challenge faced by Northsall, in order to address the pressures which could lead to withdrawal, is to identify this individual breaking point before it leads to drop out, through an individualised approach to assess the likely weighting of current factors in dropping out for each student (See also the flow chart– Figure 4, page 196). Tutors Dee and Stella believe in a proactive approach by the college, with the student's tutor spearheading the initiative:

I do believe that me contacting the students straight away and encouraging them to come back would make a lot of difference to whether they stayed. (Tutor Dee)

We [tutors] support the student, get them over those barriers in terms of yes you can do it and also when they need it, 'just do it'! (Laughs) (Tutor Stella)

Tutor Martin has a different perspective. He suggests that poor decision making on the part of the student before the course is the cause of their difficulty. This suggests he sees the balance of responsibility for managing the stressors in the student's life should be towards taking their own responsibility:

They want their educational experience to work around their current circumstances and they don't understand that it doesn't work like that. (Tutor Martin)

Tutor Martin, when asked why students leave, did not talk about HE in FE's role as trying to prevent this:

I think that's just when they realise oh this is too difficult...I can't think of any other reason really. (Tutor Martin)

Gill's (2016) suggestion, in agreement with Tutors Stella and Dee, of a proactive approach by college staff to students, to encourage retention, would seem to be preferable. SSO June, like Tomlinson (2014), suggests that in the current climate of austerity and reduced funding, proper time and support for tutors or SSOs to engage with vulnerable HE in FE students could be costly and prohibitive. This was felt keenly by Tutor Stella:

The way we support [students] is in terms of tutorials but it is quite difficult you know because it's having the time. I want to spend more time with students to make sure they are actually getting it. (Tutor Stella)

It would probably be much more costly both personally and to Colleges, if students do not complete their course (Smith, 2007a). Intervention by staff to support student resilience which could be part of existing tutorial provision would be efficient and could support retention. This lack of support, as a financial issue is noted by Lana and discussed later in this section.

The development of resilience could be supported by understanding how factors or stressors in the student's life can outweigh their ability to study. This could also facilitate a conversation between student and tutor or student and SSO if the tutor is not available. This awareness raising may enable better personal resilience via communication,

combined with a consideration of Hedberg and Tone's (2014) enablers and stressors to successful study.

Mental illness and resilience are related concepts because those who suffer mental ill health constantly need to be resilient in order to function (Binnie, 2017). This factor will now be examined in terms of data collected from the participants in the study.

4.1.3 Mental health and resilience

Supporting good mental health and addressing any issues which may arise around mental ill health, is of increasing concern to institutions in all levels of education. (Kitzrow, 2003; Government Green Paper, 2018). Out of the ten student participants in the study, three reported mental ill health as the main or a major reason for dropping out of their study. These three students talked about mental ill health in terms of a situation which was exacerbated or developed after they started the course:

I was having health issues as well, PTSD, so I was not very good at the time either
(Kane)

It wasn't the course itself that made me leave, it was my mental health that made me really poorly... (Gill)

It was more sort of my health and the circumstances... I've got depression and anxiety... The stress of it was just making me more ill, so the decision was made to leave. (Lana)

The increase in mental ill health in recent times, which was noted by The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS, 2016) and the organisation Young Minds (2017) was reflected in SSO Sally's own observations:

The proportion of students that have depression and anxiety that I work with has gone up considerably year on year. Whether that's people coming forward more, or people are experiencing it more I don't know.... (SSO Sally)

Students with poor resilience and mental ill health often see the problem as external to them, rather than something they can control and improve as an aspect of their personality, '*... so, the decision was made to leave.*' (Lana). This statement indicates devolved personal responsibility for the decision by asserting it in the third person. A possible difference in expectations in those students who have demonstrated mental health vulnerability as identified by Staff Dee as a risk factor for leaving:

I think some people with mental health issues, and I'm not talking about dyslexia. I'm talking about something far more serious that has been the result of abuse or addiction, depression those kinds of things. They can impact a student because sometimes they have unrealistic expectations of how other people will treat them. (Tutor Dee)

Addressing this devolving of personal responsibility can be a successful approach to building resilience (Eisenburg and Hunt, 2009). Encouraging students to monitor their own resilience levels would mitigate some of the resource need and also encourage HE students to take control of their own learning and some responsibility for developing their resilience (Leitch and Day, 2000; El-Dib, 2007). This seems to be something Tutor Dee is already starting to implement by encouraging students to take responsibility for their own metacognitive reflection and improvement:

One of the things that has been brought out is the student's willingness to reflect on [learning] to move forward. I've done it in a way where they are in a safe environment, I don't make it public. It's not the whole class. (Tutor Dee)

Self-reported mental ill health of students in Higher Education is generally better than for people in the general population (Eisenburg and Hunt, 2009). This would indicate that funding help for HE in FE students who do experience difficulty is desirable. According to Murphy and Fonagy (2012) low socioeconomic groups, a feature of the WP cohort at Northsall, are at increased risk of mental ill health. The best approach would be to support their mental health, ensure they are retained and achieve their degree level qualification (MHF, 2016). This means there may be greater need at FEIs such as Northsall, for specialist support for students with mental ill health who will need staff who have the skills and knowledge to do it. In reality, there is likely to be only a small number of tutors with the appropriate professional background. In the current financial climate which FEIs find themselves since 2010, has possibly made student centred approaches more difficult to achieve (Tomlinson, 2014).

SSO June also talks about mental health as underpinning the aims of the project which funds her role through a HEFCE funded project. SSO Mike also acknowledged that addressing mental ill health is sometimes part of his role:

[When advising a tutor about a student] *Sounds like there may be some personal issues there; access the college councillor.* (SSO Mike)

Trying to incorporate intervention into existing tutorial provision or encouraging greater participation by raising awareness of personal resilience and encouraging students in their own reflection and self-assessment may be useful, even if on-going support needs to be sourced outside FEIs (see SEO at Northsall's list of external points of referral, Appendix 7). Binnie (2017) suggested that those with mental ill health are more resilient than the general population which, given the possible stressors they may face from inadequate

college support for them, seems likely to be the case and necessary for them to complete their studies. As these quotes from Lana, Kane and Gill, when they were asked about why they left suggest that, in support of Binnie (ibid), mental ill health and poor resilience are not necessarily bound together:

it was more my health and the circumstances that I was in. I've got depression and anxiety, so it was quite difficult at times and I was going through a rough couple of months. I just didn't have the energy to do stuff, so the work I was doing was not up to standard. The stress of it was just making me more ill, so the decision was made to leave. (Lana)

I think it was a mixture of both, the stress from the course and the PTSD was playing up so I thought it was best to pull out (Kane)

it wasn't the course itself, that made me leave it was my mental health that made me really poorly but if you know, If I hadn't had to deal with all that I would still be there and I would be doing my work and I would be really happy (Gill)

Physical health can be as difficult as mental health to overcome and between them represented the reasons why seven out of ten of the student participants left their course. The impact of the student's own or familial ill health will now be considered.

4.1.4 Physical health and resilience

Personal or familial physical ill health are the reasons given by three of the student participants for leaving their HE in FE course (see table A, appendix 8). This seems to be because these reasons are major stressors which individual resilience is less likely to overcome (Hedberg and Tone, 2014):

The reason why I left was because of an illness... my illness is up and down every day ...so meeting things was quite difficult. (Ellie)

It should be noted that pre-existing physical or mental ill health are not necessarily predictors of drop out as often students in this position are familiar with historical coping strategies (Rutter, 2012). Difficulty arises when there is a new or additional stressor within their immediate experiences (Eisenburg et al., 2009):

I would just constantly pick-up infections and then not be able to sleep. ...It got to the point that on a good day I was on crutches and on a bad day I was in a wheelchair.
(Jake)

The deterioration in health described by Jake makes it easy to see how he experienced additional stressors. Jake was determined to return and complete his studies at Northsall eventually which may support Kleinfield's (2009) assertions about resilience and gender differences which suggest that men are better able to overcome health problems.

The literature tends to link physical health to wider issues of 'wellbeing' (Theodoratou et al., 2016), especially emotional and psychological wellbeing (Rose, 2017). This seems to point to the interconnectedness of ill health with individual resilience. For Julia, the health stressor was her parent's, rather than her own deteriorating health:

I thought that whole year I would be caring for my Mum and doing some art [on the course]. ...My Mum went critical in about November and went back into hospital, so I had to travel to [city nearby] every day and it just became too much. (Julia)

The fluctuations in the balance between the weight of life circumstances, the estimation of her ability to cope and subsequent further weights of deteriorating circumstances, can clearly be seen in Julia's story. It can be represented as balance scales, the outcome of which is really dependent on the weighting given to each of the factors. This is explored further in section 5.2.2 in Julia's table (page 199).

Although only SSO Mike of the staff participants mentions physical ill health specifically, Staff Dee seems to suggest that there is a level of severity of difficulties which students can face which is likely to indicate withdrawal:

It might be due to illness or wider family issues sometimes that is a factor which means that at this particular point it's just not quite right for them. (SSO Mike)

The past two years, I don't have students leaving, other than for really serious reasons (Tutor Dee)

Therefore, it might be helpful to students for staff to take account of whether an illness in themselves or their immediate family is pre-existing, and they could therefore be effectively supported through it, as opposed to acute and unlikely to be overcome (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Holschuh and LeCroy, 2012). This assessment will be individual to the student and include their assessment of Hedberg and Tone's (2014) personal enablers and stressors. A way to assess this through the tutorial process may be helpful.

The next overarching factor affecting drop out concerns the student's experience of Northsall and their own 'learning journey' as they encounter a variety of factors which are based within Northsall as an institution (Burdon, 2002).

4.2. Institutional factors which may influence resilience and retention.

This section examines institutional factors, which may affect student retention on HE in FE courses. Each is encountered in a broadly sequential way as the students move through their college learning journey in Northsall. Learning experiences will be influenced by students' own expectations of study and can determine whether they have sufficient resilience against a difficulty they may encounter within Northsall and stay on the course,

or their resilience will be tested beyond their ability to cope and they will leave (Brown et al., 2001; Cohen et al., 2011). This includes the importance of relationships with tutors and other students, which can mitigate against the difficulties which students may encounter (Gill, 2016), as well as the wider culture and services in Northsall itself, experienced as either supportive or unsupportive (Thomas, 2002). Ultimately, Northsall's response to student difficulty, and what attempts are made to re-engage the student through bolstering their resilience to continue their learning journey will dictate whether a student is retained (Park et al., 2011).

The first part of this section considers the provision of effective and appropriate guidance which is especially important to WP students because they will need to be informed and advised of learning opportunities which may fit around their complex life responsibilities (Watt and Paterson, 2010; Sperlinger et al. 2018).

4.2.1 Information, advice and guidance at Northsall (IAG)

A stressor such as choosing the wrong course could put such a strain onto the student's ability to be resilient, so that they leave. This supports Watt and Paterson's (2010) concerns about the national importance of good pre- course guidance. Lack of satisfaction with the advice given by Northsall was apparent in three of the student responses and seemed to be a contributing factor to their withdrawal. Leah's response to a question about whether the course met her needs, suggests she was not given good IAG:

Not at all no...I would probably do things slightly differently...I would have gone straight on to university... (Leah)

Two students were given, what they regarded as, poor guidance by staff because they advised them to take their course, even though it did not fit what they wanted to do:

I wish I could have...joined another course...it wasn't really the course I was supposed to do (Valentina).

I was only having difficulties [because] to be honest I was not on the right course for me (Julia)

Kane was on the wrong course because he left for another one at another level of study:

I think it was lack of preparation on my behalf and I'm currently doing a level 2 now, that's more my level. (Kane)

The importance of ensuring students are 'on the right course' seemed to be echoed in the staff responses:

Sometimes they leave cos it's not the right course for them (Tutor Stella)

Why they leave? I think that's just when they realise oh this is too difficult, or this is just not what they thought (Tutor Martin)

However, of the other six student participants, three expressed no opinion about the IAG they received and the remaining three described it simply as 'good' when directly asked, so poor experiences were not reported by the majority. SSO Sally suggests that some students feel staff may be actively misleading or hiding aspects of the course experience in order to secure another student for the programme of study:

"I [the student] got sold something completely different before I started..." I [Sally] don't know how true that is because I'm not there and how much they take in and how much the tutors say. (SSO Sally)

This is supported by Julia; whose experiences demonstrate that she did not receive the right guidance from course tutors and for that reason they are recounted in detail here.

She describes the initial approach she made to Northsall and the advice she received:

I called someone in the middle of August. E [Tutor] called me right back which was good ... I was explaining what my situation was and what I wanted from a course... I was asking for just some art classes... ..cos the following year I was going to be doing a course in art therapy (Julia)

Julia's journey through IAG seemed to get more complicated and less suited to her needs:

Something happened from that conversation with E. He understood what I wanted. By the time I had put in my application, N [another tutor] wrote to me because I've already got a master's. ... and said, 'it sounds like you would be interested in art. master's in creative practice ...' I said 'no...I've already got a masters what I want is a place and a time to go to learn different art skills' I was told by E that I could do it on two days, ...I work as a consultant, so I can jiggle around my timetable. I'm also looking after my elderly Mother who is ill. Then a few weeks passed. N wrote back, oh are you interested in this masters? Case of: No. Time went by ...I called back, and they said there's supposed to be an interview process ...But what I think had happened during that time and that process is that the course that I wanted got discontinued...right at the last minute. This [the new course N offered] needs to be full time but no-one told me, so by the time I came for my interview, which I had to push for...She just took my application and just said enrol next week. But she said, Oh the course is three days and I said, 'I've been told its two days' ... I've moved around my things and I've come to this interview knowing and thinking it's different. I sat and thought about it and I really wanted to do that... I was caring for my Mum...I know what I'll do is I'll focus on this art; I'll do this art for three days. I'll drop down another workday... So, I thought about it ... I think in my interview and the enrolment day was the same day, I didn't have a lot of time to think. (Julia)

Julia received differing advice from different tutors and a change in course provision between her application and the start of the course. This directly supports Kidd and Wardman's (1999) view that resourcing and timetabling should not dictate a student's enrolment decision. Julia seems to offer a clear example of Northsall encouraging students to enrol on a course that is not really suited either to their availability, or career objectives but may have suited current college provision (Sperlinger et al., 2018:36).

4.2.2 Influence on course choice

Family and friends could be important influencers in the lives of many people, and it could be assumed that they wield the most power when it comes to a student's decision to join an education programme (Kidd and Wardman, 1999). This juxtaposes with Maringe (2006) who found that students often do their own research into HE courses, which is much more accessible thanks to greater access to the internet. Maringe (ibid) suggests students start with a shortlist of institutions in their local area and they are then influenced by the consumerist concerns of whether a particular degree will lead to a particular job. He found that tutors' advice was the third most important influencing factor, with parental advice lower on the list at 9th out of 10 (Maringe, 2006). Social media, according to Maringe, is used by HE institutions to market information and it may also be influencing student degree choices. SSO Sally talks about those who may be actively working against family expectations:

"My Dad does the scaffolding, and he don't know why I'm doing this, and he doesn't understand". But they are still here so they are not bowing into that pressure.
(SSO Sally)

This presupposes that all students, particularly those from a WP background, have ready access to the internet. Older students are less likely to be 'digital immigrants' than 'digital naturals' (Koumachi, 2019:56). This needs to be understood against the disincentive to HE study which competence in ICT skills may represent to some students because institutional website information can appear complicated. The navigation of unfamiliar Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) can be discouraging to both investigating and engaging with HE study (Almeida et al., 2016).

Overall, the picture which emerges from the student participants in the study is that they are making their own decisions (Kidd and Wardman, 1999). Students consistently talk about decisions in the first person. Kane, also from a non-graduate background, suggests that his difficulties on the course stemmed, not from poor advice but from his own experiences on the course:

...lack of preparation on my behalf I was just out of my depth (Kane)

Ross also supported Kane's assertion of experiencing difficulty in staying on the course, which they had not anticipated:

It wasn't that I was having difficulties, it was just the feeling that it wasn't what I wanted to do any more (Ross)

These students do not directly blame poor IAG, but the staff's perception was of poor pre-course research or student unpreparedness for study because they seem to be blaming the students; this may not necessarily be the reality. SSO Sally even questions herself in this assumption, '*They must have done their research!*' (SSO Sally).

When all the information provided by the students is taken into consideration, especially Julia's experiences, it is obvious that the provider was at fault in providing inconsistent and sometimes, inappropriate guidance.

Students can, in some cases, be easily influenced to progress to the next level of study without seeming to give it too much thought (Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1990). Internal transition within Northsall was important to HE in FE recruitment targets (Northsall Strategic Plan 2013- 2014; MIS, 2014). SSO Mike, as an FE manager himself sums this up:

I try to make sure they [teaching staff] understand the financial side of it.... I don't get involved in interviewing students or anything like that because I know I've got a

slightly different motivation and I wouldn't want that to cloud my view of a learner who's suitable or not (SSO Mike)

Anyone who offers IAG in a college could reasonably be following the advice of the DfES in 2006 which encouraged HE in FE provision to promote participation, particularly to WP students who may have low or repressed aspirations as a feature of their disempowerment because of middle class policy makers (Archer et al., 2005). However, Willetts (2017) suggests that Government initiatives can mean a HE institution attempting to fill up programmes of study even if the course recommended to individual students is not right for their circumstances or they do not meet the criteria for entry. Students can get caught up in the system and pushed towards HE when they may have preferred employment or an apprenticeship, and this only comes to light after they start the course:

People just start [the course] because that's the way that it's been set up for them...I have worked with students that have been doing a year of something and questioning whether it's the right course for them (SSO Sally)

SSO Sally talks about the haste with which some students seem to make the decision to enter HE study:

Because you wouldn't ...walk into a car dealership and straight away pick that six-grand car, you would do a bit of research and think about it. (SSO Sally)

This resonates with Krieshok (1998) that early closure in decision making for potential HE students should be discouraged.

Ineffective IAG seems to involve a complex interplay between the quality of course guidance and staff partiality, along with institutional changes and poor decision making on the part of the student. Kane, Valentina and Ross point to the need for a student-centred

and independent approach to IAG which should be tailored to their individual life circumstances and needs as WP students (Sperlinger et al, 2018). To ensure good retention for HE in FE students, they need to be on the right course for them (Kidd and Wardman, 1999). Effective course guidance will depend, to some extent, on the resources available to provide independent IAG to prospective HE students and the easing of pressure on staff to meet recruitment targets, especially since 2010, in order to allow tutors to provide more objective, individualised advice (Bowl, 2001; Hodgson, 2015).

Once a student has made the right decision for them to start a HE in FE course, they could find the transition between study at level 3 and level 4 difficult, and it is this which will now be considered (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009).

4.2.3 Transition to HE in FE study

The transition to study at degree level can be a difficult time for students new to HE. Allan et al. (2014) suggests that the having good resilience can enable students to make a more effective transition. Transitioning to HE study from level 3 and strategies to support students at this time, including study skills, bridging courses and induction content seemed to be important to the staff participants:

I don't think level 3 prepares for them for level 4 at this point in time in education. I think it's why some institutions struggle to retain students simply because of the type of programme that they do at level 3. (Tutor Martin)

I would say the transition [From level 3] and they [older students] find it easier, maybe they can relate to it more. The ones that have come through the college. Some do well, and some struggle I think we could do more in terms of preparing them (Tutor Stella)

Transitioning to higher education study could mean experiencing difficulties at the start of the programme:

I think that transition from level 3 to level 4 or from outside of college, coming back into education is challenging for some people. (SSO Sally)

I spend a lot of my time in inductions and things trying to get across: "What is academia", because I don't think they actually grasp that. (SSO June)

At the start of the foundation degree there can be a few you know wobbles, for various reasons. Students start late.... (SSO Mike)

SSO Mike highlights a possible issue about HE students who begin studying after the course has started. There were no late starters amongst the student participants to assess how accurate this assertion may be. Although the students did not report difficulty as occurring at the start of their studies, Lana and Kane did report struggling with academic expectations and workload more generally. For Kane, the work was, 'Too hard' and for Lana the course was, '...really difficult because there was a lot of work involved'. This could have been as a result of poor transition support. However, it could also have been due to poor IAG or lack of preparation by the student, as noted by Kane.

Transition may be an area which could be improved upon by ensuring students have adequate preparation for their HE study. The staff participants had some ideas about what they thought would support transition to HE study in FEIs:

...more practical exercises with the students to help them with the transition from level 3 to level 4. ...there are students that struggle so we are actually going to do more practice (Tutor Stella)

Tutor Stella suggested supporting the academic skills of HE in FE students to aid their transition, but there were also some more diverse suggestions:

I think young people at level 3 should be put in touch with professionals so that it can be inspirational (Tutor Dee)

Take 'em away on a residential. Definitely. On some kind of summer bridging programme (Tutor Martin)

Taster weeks or taster days in the course, that they are interested in. Talks from ex-students... Mandatory interviews with Connexions (careers service) ...just double checking that they have explored all the options available before they commit. (SSO Sally)

Teaching and learning experiences are likely to influence whether students leave or stay and achieve (Cornelius-White, 2007). It is this important source of support for students, especially those who are experiencing stress to their resilience, which will be examined in the next sections.

4.2.4 HE in FE teaching and learning identities

Teaching relationships and all that entails are central to the student experience (Gill, 2016). Reay et al. (2001a) suggest WP students experience dissonance between home life and HE study. This can be seen in HE in FE student's reluctance to take on the identity of 'student'. Tutor Martin notes this aversion. However, his expectations of HE seem to be influenced by his own home life and study within an HEI (Gorard and Smith, 2006; Gill, 2016). He seems somewhat perplexed by the multiple identities of adults, being parents, employees as well as students, compared with younger students, who tend to describe themselves simply as 'students':

They are a very strange student body I find, HE in FE students. They are from a low-income background, but also get cars with private number plates and it's because they just work a lot and they simply don't identify themselves as students. It's like 'oh I'm just doing a bit of studying on the side' Whereas when I was at uni in a big HEI everything I did was involved with my student life (Tutor Martin)

Tutor Martin may struggle with Illeris' (2017) suggestion that successful adult learning is characterised by current and past life experiences and how these may be used within teaching. He does not seem to be embracing Smit's (2012) suggestion that HE should be trying to support WP students in what can seem an alien environment for them. By contrast, Tutor Dee is trying to understand what WP HE in FE student difficulties might be and how to address them by drawing on students' own emphasis on employment related priorities:

I have reflected on what their [her students'] strengths and weaknesses are, and they don't know how to read, and they don't know how to learn, and they don't know how to write. So, I have changed my curriculum. I actually now contextualise it alongside work-related learning (Tutor Dee)

What Tutor Dee is saying seems to resonate with Illeris (2017) and reflect Rogers' (2002) assertion that adult learners need to feel their previous, and current experiences are recognised and appreciated within current learning:

Mature women ... their confidence is really low so I'm trying to build that up and say it's [academic work] a skill that anybody can learn, you've got life experience to put into this to question. (SSO June)

The approach of the tutor to the HE relationship in a FEI can be very important to student resilience and retention, especially in HE in FE in which teaching pedagogy sometimes fluctuates between teaching and lecturing (Jephcote et al., 2008). This will be considered further in the next section.

4.2.5 Higher Education in Further Education pedagogy

Higher Education in Further Education has tried to emulate the practices of HEIs to maintain their validating partner's expectations of a Higher Education learning

environment (Clegg, 2008). This seems to create some divergence between an adapted Further Education style of teaching which is trying to embrace HE teaching philosophy whilst HE teaching philosophy is moving towards using FE pedagogical approaches (Walker et al., 2008; Oxford, 2008).

Tutor Martin's attitude to his teaching is that HE in FE students should adapt to traditional HEI styles of lecturing and learning:

*[To students] You've got to go away and do it yourself so just that general level of independence that we're looking for... I remember once teaching a student, we finished the lecture and she said, 'what do we do now?' I was like, 'Do what you want!' 'I'm not going to tell you what to do I've finished teaching you now'.
(Tutor Martin)*

SSO June, has an extensive background in HE and would like to move towards a HEI academic model of teaching:

*[Question to students] 'What does it mean to study in higher education?' I think we could do more of that so that they see how they have got to operate differently.
(SSO June)*

SSO June and Tutor Martin seem to have an encompassing view of HE as an identity and they seem to have the view that it should be the responsibility of the student to adapt to traditional HE teaching practices and expectations (Hawley and Harris, 2005). This could mean that staff are expecting a greater level of independent learning as in traditional HE scholarship (Palfreyman and Temple, 2017). This was not an expectation shared by some of the students:

The first year you were told everything you had to do specifically; you had a lot more support, when you got into the second year, you're left to it.' (Lana)

'Students, a lot of them, haven't been there before and it's just a bit more support regarding where to get your information, things like that. (Leah)

I was asking for support. The tutors didn't give me it. (Gill)

Deem (2011) suggests the 'push' for this change in the approach of HEIs is linked to the increase in accountability and more prevalent managerialist culture (Bolden et al., 2012). HEIs themselves are now finding themselves in a more target driven culture (Anderson and Williams, 2018). SSO June notes this change in HEI teaching pedagogy:

Universities are learning that they have to put a lot more effort into that [teaching and supporting students] (SSO June)

This possible contradiction between HE teaching as fostering the development of independent learning and the need to support students as consumers in a marketised and financially challenged education system suggested by Smith (2015) could contribute to student stress and test their resilience. Gill (2016) suggested that retention is an activity supported by a tutor. Tutor support can be academic, pastoral and as identified by Tutor Dee in particular, also emotional. The support offered to students by all staff participants came through strongly in the interview responses. It is this support which will be examined more fully in the next section.

4.2.6 Tutor-student relationships which support resilience

It is apparent from both staff and student responses that the care and attention which many HE in FE tutors show towards their students can contribute to bolstering the student's self-regulation and resilience when they face difficulties, whether on the course or in their personal lives (Schunk and Zimmerman, 2008). This support could cynically be seen as an attempt to ensure a student forms a relationship with them which will result in the students staying and the FEI meeting its targets for achievement (Smith, 2015). In either case, where the outcome is positive, the student is more likely to be retained and achieve their qualification.

According to Jephcote et al. (2008) a close, supportive relationship with students has always been true of Further Education tutors and likely carried over into their Higher Education teaching. This was noted by a number of both student and staff participants:

I just think they are all great on that course.... they are committed, really into their subject.... (Julia)

The tutors are really easy to talk to... they are all really nice, down to earth people... like mentors, they'll point you in the right direction and just help you out whenever you need it. (Ross)

[tutors]...were nice, they helped me feel comfortable with the actual course. They were really welcoming and inviting and if I had any problems, I didn't hesitate to ask them (Gill)

I think relationships are important. I think some students do complete and achieve degrees on the basis of having a good relationship with the tutor (Tutor Martin)

In relation to a relationship with the tutor, I think it is central to the student's success (Tutor Dee)

It's so key, for level 4 to have that one to one to know the tutors and for the tutors to know them (Tutor Stella)

I don't see quite the same distance with FE with the students in an FE college on a HE programme with their tutor (SSO June)

When asked about the differences between HEIs and FEIs, Tutor Martin emphasises less priority on the fostering of a relationship with the student in HEIs:

HE in FE students talk about things which you just wouldn't be able to with tutors in a big lecture theatre ... from my experience [in a HEI] if a tutor walked in who was new, we'd just be, 'who's this?' Whatever let's crack on. But a new tutor in this [FE] environment it's a huge thing. Maybe because they build up such a strong relationship with their tutor (Tutor Martin)

This difference between the FE tutor relationship in FEIs and HEIs is noted by Taylor, (2008) but does not seem to support Hawley and Harris' (2005) view that the pursuit of teaching over pastoral care in HE can be a problem. This was also noted by the SSOs who also see a difference between HE and FE teaching in a FEI:

They [students] don't necessarily get all the support from the staff that you would expect... I think we are very clear about what the expectations are and what they [students] need to do and take responsibility for. (SSO Mike)

...independence of learning. That not being guided through it as much is a problem... for some people. (SSO Sally)

The tutor-student relationship in FE is stronger than HE (SSO June)

Of the Northsall ex-student participants, which you would assume were inclined to be negative about a course they decided to leave, only half had something negative to say about their tutors (Nickerson, 1998). Only Gill mentioned it as a factor in her decision to leave. This suggests that poor staff-student relationships are not the main reason for student withdrawal, a fact supported by The Welsh Assembly Government in 2009 which was based on research such as those by Yorke and Thomas (2003) and Davies and Elias (2003).

Student and tutor relationships have an element of emotional attachment as defined by Bowlby (1999). Where students had formed effective attachments with tutors this was very powerfully protective for students and supported the building of their resilience (Robertson, 2012). This is summed up by Julia, when referring to tutors as, *'Really caring for the students and the group'* (Julia). Tutor Dee went further to suggest emotional intelligence and getting involved in student's emotional issues in all areas of their lives was part of her role as a tutor:

They [tutors] also need to have emotional stability, they need to have emotional intelligence. They are happy with what they are teaching and then they are able to interpret what students need. (Tutor Dee)

This can make it more challenging to support the adult and widening participation students at Northsall who are, as Rogers (2002) puts it, not at the start of their process of learning and growth but somewhere in the middle. Tutors Dee and Stella seem to have been successful at this:

I've spent more time getting behind what motivates them [students], their backgrounds and why they are feeling that way and I'm surprised, I wouldn't have thought that it was impacted so much by me ...personally I have found it's more to do with my attitude and how I can make a module relevant to them in their learning (Tutor Dee)

We get personalized emails that are thanking us for the support, and they say that we wouldn't have been able to do it without you. They would but it's because we instil that confidence in them, they are able to do it, we support the student, get them over those barriers (Tutor Stella)

What can also be important is recognising that not all Further Education learners may have the same requirements (McGrath, 2009):

'She [my tutor] couldn't do enough for me to be honest' (Kane).

SSO June's students told her:

...because you just concentrated on me and my difficulty and gave me a number of solutions and strategies which would benefit me (SSO June)

Tutor Stella's approach is similarly supportive in building a learning relationship with her students:

Understanding where they have come from in terms of their background and then finding out what are they finding difficult. Only by getting to know them... that is really key for success for them (Tutor Stella)

This is an indication of the potential depth of the relationship which can develop between tutor and student from Gill:

I'm going to miss [tutor name] and [tutor name] cos they were really good tutors and I thought I'm probably not going to see them again. (Gill)

Julia made it clear that she felt fully supported and was loyal to her tutors and did not want any blame regarding her decision to leave to fall upon them:

You know they are committed teachers...I don't want to say against any of the lecturers or anything...I have spoken to [her tutor] she's lovely, I met her and explained what had gone on and she said pop in if you want to come back. (Julia)

All of which would seem to support Salisbury et al. (2006) and Jephcote et al. (2008) regarding the increased emphasis of Further Education tutors on their relationships with students. This is even more persuasive from the ex-student participants who would be more likely to view their HE experiences as negative (Eisner and Van der Plight, 1988).

Tutor Martin raises an interesting issue about ensuring the boundaries between professional and personal relationships between tutors and students are maintained:

I think there are students who don't understand the lines of familiarity... I had to challenge behaviour or speak to him [a student] about something; he looks at me almost as if, 'why is a mate speaking to me like that?' and he really didn't engage with me for the rest of the year, so I think a relationship is important but it's managing it. (Tutor Martin)

It is clear from both student and tutor responses to the research that attachments, such as Bowlby (1999) would recognise them, are developing between staff and students in HE in FE and this may be an important factor in the development of student resilience, especially if a student does not experience a loving and supportive relationship outside of Northsall (Grey, 2015). An understanding of Bowlby's (ibid) attachment theory would help create an

atmosphere for further developing resilience. This assertion is also supported by Grey (2015) who highlighted the need for developing resilience through a supportive relationship between students and staff.

The development of self-efficacy and resilience more generally in students, according to Gu and Day (2006), can only happen when a tutor is themselves resilient and available to be both a role model and offer their students, support. Tutor Dee takes this responsibility seriously and talks about supporting her students with the development of their emotional resilience which Troy and Mauss (2011) suggested is done through the ability to self-regulate and Rogers' (2002) concept of 'self-belief'. SSO June's assertions about supporting students' confidence seems to emphasise the importance of Further Education tutors, ensuring that the learning experience at Northsall is different from the one they remember from school (Salisbury and Jephcote, 2008). This is the method which Tutor Dee employs through teaching students to deal with disappointment as well as creating firm boundaries about her expectations of behaviour:

The biggest thing I changed was the expectations. As soon as they come in the door there's no leeway, this is how we are going to behave right from the start. ...don't get me wrong my lessons are not dull and I don't think I'm mean, but this is what I expect. Next week, this is the consequences of not doing it, your falling behind, let's get you moving up, right carry-on next week as well. I've found that is what has actually kept them going and it's the poorer students who have actually succeeded (Tutor Dee)

This raises the question about which approach is most appropriate in developing emotional resilience through their relationships with students. Tutor Dee becomes very involved, promotes attachments and tackles all issues in her students in a very direct way in order to try and build resilience. Tutor Martin is more sensitive to professional

boundaries. Tutor Stella seems to take an approach which is somewhere in between, supportive but not getting so emotionally involved:

It's that support, getting them to believe in themselves, its confidence. That comes from knowing the student and knowing how; how to bring the best out of them. Because some students react to praise, whereas some students don't. (Tutor Stella)

There is research by Page (2018) about professional love in the early years, but there seemed to be little about what kind of emotional support is most appropriate and effective for HE or FE. Bowl (2001) suggested that teaching has an emotional element for WP learners and fosters a form of attachment. It seems important to HE in FE students to feel they are supported by tutors and this may help them to develop their resilience further (Robertson, 2012).

Since the introduction of student fees in 1998, student expectations as consumers seem to have changed the relationship between tutor and student (Maringe, 2006). It is the impact of this on HE in FE tutor student relationships which will now be considered.

4.2.7 Students as consumers

Since the marketisation of HE, efficiency savings have been made in staffing and resources (Lynch, 2006). FE managers believe these are essential to stay within funding constraints, but they also result in reduced tutor contact time with students (Simkins and Lumby, 2006). The resulting lack of available support to students experiencing stress to their resilience could mean they fail to be retained on their course (Gill, 2016). Gill sums up the conflicted attitude of students who are looking to receive as much help as they need in

order to achieve, but also recognise that they are not always sure exactly what that might look like:

I wasn't really getting much help, but I suppose there's only really so much help you can get. I can't expect them to spoon-feed me with the work. I'm not saying they should because it's my work. (Gill)

Students often now expect staff to offer them any support they may need to pass their degree (Tomlinson, 2014; Bates and Kaye, 2014). Ellie seems to be influenced by a consumer identity which commodifies learning:

It didn't fit my needs... if there was skypeing ability so that if I was at home and I'm unable to come in. I know that some universities do have an online capability where people can join in like over the phone so that if they can't make it in that would be like super helpful ...you can just join a call; you still get taught (Ellie)

She does not seem to have considered if this approach was appropriate to the content and nature of her course, nor whether relationships with tutors are important to learning (Illeris, 2017). Without face-to-face contact she may have struggled, but still felt she had purchased an entitlement to pass. Gill (2016) asserts that retention is an activity supported by a tutor and all the tutors mention the importance of the support they provide to their students and its correlation to student retention:

I think it's central to them staying. ...in my class, I'm involved with everybody and everything and they have all stayed (Tutor Dee)

You know you have got to be very patient; you've got to have the empathy. You've got to be passionate about what you do... If you don't have that, then I don't think all the students would succeed. (Tutor Stella)

...students withdraw from having poor relationships with them [tutors] it's another double-edged sword in that it's very difficult to manage but ... important you get it right. If you get it wrong, it just doesn't work. (Tutor Martin)

This makes it difficult to pinpoint where the balance lies in the joint staff and student endeavour to bring about achievement. As a mixture of the two, the split could be contentious, for example 50:50 or 60:40 or any other combination. This can create an expectation 'gap' between what the student wants and what Northsall can realistically provide with the reduced resources (Tomlinson, 2014). This also conflicts with traditional views of HE study as an independent learning activity (Palfreyman and Temple, 2017). Nixon et al. (2018) suggest this changes the nature of what the student is receiving as they are in control of education as a commodity. They see higher levels of student support as possibly affecting the ability of students to self-regulate (Troy and Mauss, 2011).

Managing student expectations of realistic tutor time and support in a marketised education system is a key issue for all HE institutions. Placing some responsibility for assessing resilience, onto the student, by raising awareness of resilience and encouraging self-assessment, could be helpful. It is suggested that a 'toolkit' consisting of a checklist and discussion of resilience and enablers against stressors may support HE in FE student retention (Hedberg and Tone, 2014).

In the absence of this supportive tutor-student relationship, which was revealed as so important in 4.2.6, the effects on student resilience can be such that they drop out of their HE in FE programme (Gill, 2016). It is the participant reported effects of this which will now be examined.

4.2.8 Less positive tutor-student relationships

Some negativity bias when considering their relationships with tutors may be expected in a participant group who have made the decision to leave their course (Rozin and Royzman, 2001). However, half the student participants reported good relationships with their tutors. Ellie, Karla, Lana, Kane, and Gill all seem to be saying that the reason they did not have such a good learning relationship with one or more tutors was because, as David (2009) suggested, they could not negotiate with their tutor to get what they needed:

Some tutors were better than others. (Ellie)

There was [Tutor name]. She kind of like got me. The other one. It was a male, he didn't help, didn't kind of get what it was. (Karla)

We had 3-4 tutors; I think. Most of them were fine, it was our main tutor wasn't very supportive. I got a few health issues and he just was not understanding at all. (Lana)

I thought I got negative vibes off a couple of tutors but that might just be their personality. (Kane)

When I was doing graphic design [in] the first year, I couldn't do my work, I was asking for support. The tutors didn't give me it. One of them just said, 'Life happens, you've just got to get over it' and I'm thinking, that's easy for you to say. (Gill)

Although it is the students' recollection of the incident, these statements suggest that some tutors have variable approaches to student support (Bourd et al., 2001).

The importance of student-tutor relationships may be highlighted best when its absence is felt. Staff turnover can mean students cannot form a self-protective relationship effectively:

[I]thought the tutors were absolutely lovely. But as soon as we started the course, one of the tutors already handed in her resignation. What was the point of her introduction, and it seemed she couldn't be bothered because she was leaving? (Leah)

Leah's view needs to be tempered with a wider view of the current climate of funding constraints which have put pressure on many tutor's' workloads (Smith, 2015; Sperlinger et al., 2018). Tutor Stella notes the time constraints which tutors experience, and which can cause frustrations in the support they would like to offer their HE in FE students:

I'd like more time. I only have half an hour to see the students for the tutorials, but I want to do more than that because I think it's so key to knowing your students.
(Tutor Stella)

It is difficult to gauge just how much impact, '*increasing diversity and fragmentation of teaching and learning roles in the sector*' has had on FE tutors' practice (Gleeson, 2005: 240). There is some indication of the stress tutors may feel from time pressure or workload:

The student thinks that they are the only student on the whole course because they don't understand your time commitments...they don't see the full picture.
(Tutor Stella)

Tutor attrition, possibly through stress, is understandably received by students as inadequacy of teaching and pastoral support, as Leah said, '*Tutors were leaving. Getting new tutors in...*' (Leah). Julia seemed to understand that Institutional pressures on staff were great:

They [staff] have pressure to fill gaps and with the changes [to the course], they wanted to keep everybody going. (Julia)

This probably impacts on positive student relationships with tutors and de-motivation can come from management decisions beyond staff control (Gale, 2003):

If they [tutors] was getting stressed out then they can't cope with the demands of the course, then what hope have the students got really? (Leah)

Although there is little research on the effects of high levels of tutor turn-over on student retention, the importance of a stable tutor-student relationship itself is highlighted. Work by Salisbury et al. (2006), Jephcote (2008) and Gill (2016) suggested that it was safe to assume that if a tutor is leaving, they are unavailable to bond effectively with students and therefore bolster the students' resilience when they encounter additional stressors.

If staff leave or are emotionally unavailable to the student, then an adequate tutor-student relationship to support students in adverse circumstances may not be possible (Bowl, 2001). In this circumstance, it can be useful to have another member of staff, such as an SSO, who can be available to form a supportive relationship with a student and help them through any institutional and individual issues they may have. The lack of a supportive relationship with a tutor or other member of staff could be a risk factor to retention for students who are experiencing stress to their resilience from any difficulties which may be currently affecting them. This could be anything they encounter on their learning journey, such as poor peer relationships or lack of satisfaction with their course.

HE in FE students encounter other students in the course of their learning journey; participant views about student peer relationships will be explored in the next section of the discussion of findings.

4.2.9 Peer relationships

Eight of the ten ex-student participants reported satisfactory relationships and friendships with their peers. Of course, perhaps better student relationships may have supported these students' resilience (Christensen and Bell, 2010). Of the two participants who

professed not to have friendships on their course, one had already attended two years of the programme before leaving. This suggests that lack of friends was not a direct factor in dropping out for them, although lack of friendships could have contributed to poor attendance patterns and risk of leaving.

Student relationship benefits include improving self-esteem and this can be important to educational success (Ikiz and Cakar, 2010; Onyishi and Ogbodo, 2012). None of the student participants were living away from home to study, with a resultant risk of poor social integration, known to be a factor in student withdrawal (Wilcox et al., 2005). However, the absence of peer support can be linked with depression and anxiety (Taylor, 2011). Gill had mental health concerns which may have meant she found it harder to make friends (Reisman, 1985):

I made maybe one or two friends but that's only because I'm really shy. It took me like three months to even speak to anybody. (Gill)

Ellie had physical ill health and she seemed uninterested in making friends,

'I wasn't there to make friends so it's not my sort of thing I guess.' (Ellie)

As she was in her third year when she left, it is reasonable to assume that lack of friends did not impact on her ability to engage with her course. Kane seems to be affected by feeling his student peers were not like him, which can be a factor in making friends (Kossinets and Watts, 2009):

I got on with them quite well. I found I was different because a lot of them were money orientated and in management roles already and I wasn't. (Kane)

The older students seemed less concerned with making friends:

Because I'm a mature student, I just let them get on with it. (Jake)

I didn't make friends with them. It was just they were young for me; I wasn't particularly fussed. (Lana)

Peer support can provide both direct and indirect buffering against problems, which students may encounter, and it is therefore important for retention (Martinez and Munday, 1998). It can also be a factor in supporting and bolstering student resilience. Thomas and Hanson (2014) suggested that social integration is key to whether students can 'persist' in their studies and Allan et al. (2014) suggested that female students are most likely to take advantage of support offered by peers and the college. This story from Tutor Dee seems to illustrate this:

*It's always the females and they always become friends and then they get too involved in each other's lives and then they start bitching and arguing, and it spills out into the class and I end up with two sides. Last year I had a mature student and a younger student who was the one who was calling her ****. It was so offensive. When I took the younger student to one side, she had been subjected to domestic violence and I couldn't understand why she was doing that and when I approached it with her, she got very defensive saying, 'I would never do that' (Tutor Dee)*

Tutor participants Dee and Martin and SSO Sally felt that, from their experience, peer group relationships could have a significant impact on students' resilience and ability to complete their studies:

I think that [student relationships] helps achievement. I think that it can very easily lead to withdrawal. Small groups just get very personalised very quickly. It can be the reason why some kids stay for the course and it can be the reason why others withdraw (Tutor Martin)

I think they [student relationships] are central, they can ruin a class and make people leave. I have this every single year, so now I actually address it right from the start. (Tutor Dee)

Students are really affected if there is an argument in the group. We have small groups here, so I think it's quite palpable. (SSO Sally)

Jake seems to take the position of observer as he comments on his relationships with his younger student peers, for whom relationships are often even more important:

There was a little bit of niggles between some of the other students but once they had left in the second semester in the first year, everything went really well. (Jake)

The implication is certainly that Jake recognised that relationship dynamics within the class needed to be harmonious for him to be able to study effectively. He seems to be describing the 'storming' part of the formation of group dynamics (Tuckman and Jenson, 1977: 419):

Some of them were like two rutting stags coming together (Jake).

The students who had progressed within Northsall felt greater emotional commitment to pre-existing friendships and this finding could be important to forming future progression groups:

I maintained the same ones and didn't really engage with the new ones. (Valentina)

Most of the people on the course I knew from before we went onto the higher education bit. (Ross)

I had to re-sit my second year. It was obviously a new group of people and I didn't make friends with them. (Lana)

In summary, peer friendships did not seem to be a 'make or break' factor for any of the student participants in the research. However, they do still matter as tutor Dee's detailed account of her difficulties with students illustrates. The somewhat indifferent approach of most of the student participants, to their peer friendships, may have been a compounding factor, which ultimately led to dropping out of the programme (Ford et al., 2015). Poor

peer relationships could be seen as a possible stressor to resilience which needs to be considered when assessing the potential vulnerability of a student to drop out.

Another risk factor for withdrawal is the interaction with wider services and the wider environment of FEIs and whether students feel the institution is supportive of their learning journey (Wilcox et al., 2005). This will now be considered in relation to the participant responses.

4.2.10 The wider environment of Northsall

A variety of factors in the wider whole college environment and culture make up the feeling of support that the student experiences. This '*Institutional habitus*' (Reay et al., 2001a:1) can directly impact on whether or not a student drops out of their studies. Ng'ang'a and Nyongesa (2012) define organisational culture as being characterised by the shared beliefs and values of individuals, underpinned by core assumptions and experiences. This culture is determined and shaped by staff and departments, such as: senior managers, middle managers, teaching staff and wider college services and administrators. Kahu (2013) suggested that perceptions of culture by students focussed on how they felt, whereas staff perspectives were more likely to be cognitive. This means a possible mismatch in communication which arises from student expectations raised through the college's marketing publicity, conversations and assumptions about learning, and the reality of students' experiences. All of which may diminish student experience through environment and values conveyed by wider staff in Northsall. This can be seen in Leah's difficulties with IT services and the library:

I got in touch with IT week in and week out. The library week in week out and I wasn't making any progress and I got stressed and more frustrated. (Leah)

As some researchers have noted, centralised services are also part of the student's learning journey (Park et al., 2011). It was equally frustrating for staff at times. Tutor Stella identified similar issues as Leah:

What we experience is computer problems, being so slow. That can be frustrating, and also the resourcing. (Tutor Stella)

Cross college services are difficult for individual staff and even managers like SSO Mike to influence:

People now realise...it's part of their job dealing with higher education issues, they are not doing you a favour...Do we really need to shut the library at 7pm? Some of those things are a bit out of my hands. (SSO Mike)

It may be simply about the student feeling that their learning concerns are heard, and their needs are met by Northsall (Kuh et al., 2011). Underlying this is often the attitude of senior managers to the commercial functions of Northsall and making decisions which may adversely affect central services and the student experience, without reference to either staff or students (Radice, 2013). As SSO Mike, as a manager, notes, 'We're really managing a business and HE is a key part of that.' (SSO Mike). Middle managers are positioned between the senior management decisions and the implementation of them to those they manage (Gleeson and Shain, 1999).

Central college services are important to the support of students. This forms part of their general perception about the college (Porter and Kramer, 2006). Leah illustrates this:

I contacted IT support week in and week out and I just felt like I was flogging a dead horse...I was struggling with the IT and everyone was trying to get the computer up

and running for me ...and that's one of the initial reasons I ended up knocking it on the head really. (Leah)

There's some things that you just can't change like estates and facilities. It doesn't really matter who the students are sometimes it isn't necessarily very student friendly. (SSO Mike)

The wider college services give students a feeling of integration (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005). In Leah's case, this feeling of not being integrated into Northsall did mean the end of her learning journey (Martinez and Munday, 1998; Jephcote et al., 2008). If Long et al. (2003) are right and the culture is formed by shared meanings, the stress the students feel from staff under significant pressure from funding efficiency savings has the potential to set a very negative college culture which could impact on student resilience and lead to retention issues.

In summary, data provided by the participants could demonstrate that Further Education institutional and cultural pressures and efficiency savings, since 2010 have impacted the student experience (Smith, 2015). Middle managers like SSO Mike seem to have been the 'buffer' suggested by Leader (2004) or able to maintain staff morale and to create a supportive network for students (Porter and Kramer, 2006). Based on the experiences of students like Leah and Julia, this was in the context of a challenging financial environment in Northsall at the time of the research. For students, having a single point of contact, such as a tutor or SSO who can support them, can be a way to offset any problems they may experience within the wider culture of Northsall. Such a single point of contact may avoid one 'critical incident' testing their resilience to the point of leaving the course (Douglas et al., 2015:332).

When a HE in FE student is experiencing problems in their personal life or at the college, the first indication of this is often declining attendance (Porter, 2008). It can be the pivotal stage in the learning journey of a student as there is now a clear manifestation of their failing resilience. The next sections will examine what the research uncovered from participants about the significance of waning attendance and what it can suggest about a student's vulnerability to dropping out of study.

4.2.11 Attendance and college interventions

Attendance is an early warning system and indicates risk of withdrawal (Porter, 2008; O'Donnell, 2009). The ex-student participants did not realise the significance of declining attendance patterns and therefore offered little information, but staff participants did understand its importance. When talking about attendance, the tutors suggested that if students attend, then they will not leave. As Tutor Stella notes, *'...if their attendance has been really good and had tutorials [students will not leave]'* and Tutor Martin remembers, *'One student whose attendance was horrific and just didn't pass things as a result'* and Tutor Dee notes that, *'An ideal student is one for me who attends every week. They will also listen to what is required of them'*. SSO Sally also felt that attendance is important to student retention and achievement:

'The single most important reason [student's leave] is probably attendance. It's almost like that's a red flag, as soon as attendance starts dropping off...because they are not bothering to even discuss what's happening' (SSO Sally)

It may be possible to use poor attendance to monitor students' engagement with their HE in FE course (O'Donnell, 2009). If poor attendance is identified early, FEIs can intervene and hopefully re-engage the student (Park et al., 2011). This can be either not attempted or is

unsuccessful. Prediction tools include studies which suggest that when attendance falls to 75 per cent it is a tipping point towards withdrawal (McClukie, 2014). Colby (2004) suggests that 70 per cent is the key figure. However, SSO Sally suggests it could be even lower:

Regular non-attendance and by that [I mean] an average of 50 per cent of each week is missed repeatedly, for a couple of months... It's a very quick decline and so that's very obvious. (SSO Sally)

By comparison, at SSO Mike's college, attendance for HE in FE students seems less problematic:

Through FE and HE we have really good attendance and retention our expectations are really high; it's engrained within the curriculum area. (SSO Mike)

SSO Sally's assertion may reflect the fact that she works with students across curriculum areas, with a broader range of widening participation students who may have more varied reasons for irregular attendance, such as employment and family responsibilities (Burd and Hodgson 2006). Whatever high expectations tutors and managers like SSO Mike and Sally may have for their students, WP students may not attend well (Paisey and Paisey, 2003):

The focus on attendance is going through that process that we have for non-attendance and chasing the students, contacting them and coming up with a plan of action. (SSO Sally)

Poor attendance is just an indicator, rather than the problem or solution in and of itself (Porter, 2008). The student will remain vulnerable, despite support, if the underlying reasons for the poor attendance are not addressed (O'Donnell, 2009). However, poor attendance can be an alert for withdrawal, which indicates an additional stressor on resilience in the student's life, and this needs attention from the institution (Newman-Ford et al., 2008).

In summary, poor or declining attendance can indicate that a HE in FE student is experiencing difficulties in their personal or college life which is causing their resilience to be stretched (O'Donnell, 2009; Robertson, 2012). This can be at a particular point where the student may try to persist on their course in the face of difficulty but eventually find they cannot continue (Thomas and Hanson, 2014). If their tutor is made aware of the issue, they can often be the best person to help the student by trying to build their resilience and supporting them to continue their studies (Robertson, 2012; Gill, 2016). In the absence of a receptive or available tutor, an SSO may be able to intervene in time to support a student vulnerable to withdrawal to stay on their course (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005).

In conclusion to this overarching theme, the main issues affecting student resilience and retention, which are located within Northsall, include:

- Independent and accurate information and guidance to ensure students are on the right course for them (Watt and Paterson, 2010).
- Supportive pastoral and academic teaching and learning (Gill, 2016).
- Positive relationships between tutor and student as central to the students' experience but which can be mitigated by other members of wider college staff, such as SSOs (Gorard and Smith, 2006).
- Wider services within Northsall, which include administrative staff and services such as the library or IT support, can be significant to student retention (Kahu, 2013).

- Addressing poor attendance promptly to ensure that students are supported to improve the balance between the stressors and enablers in their life which may decrease their chance of leaving. (O'Donnell, 2009).

There also appears to be a definite point at which, after concerted efforts to stay, a HE in FE student who is experiencing difficulties will finally admit they are struggling. This is usually indicated by declining attendance (Porter, 2008). At this point, intervention by staff is likely to be too late. Students' ability to be resilient will be pushed beyond tolerable limits for them and they leave their course.

The final over-arching factor which will now be considered in the discussion concerns those issues which are external to the college. Governmental funding decisions and accountability measures, which can impact on the HE in FE student experience, through decisions which are made by managers and staff at Northsall.

4.3 The policy context and external factors influencing student resilience and retention

The final overarching factor, Governmental policy, is a key shaper of the HE in FE student experience as it underpins decisions which are significant to student retention. (Deem, 2011). Such policies can impact on the individual student experience directly through the marketisation of higher education. Efficiency savings since The Coalition Government introduced the policy of 'austerity' in 2010 have greatly impacted FEIs and the funding they have available to provide services for all students (Tomlinson, 2014). The implementation of government policy, usually initiated by FE managers in the form of accountability, efficiency savings and meeting targets, means individual student experience

is eventually affected and is often identified by staff and students as course content or resourcing (Deem, 2011). Student expectations can mean they experience stress to their resilience when these expectations are not met (Nixon et al., 2018). The following is a summary of participant views and responses to these issues.

4.3.1 Widening participation and part time study

There are benefits for both tutors and the institution in meeting the study needs of part time and WP learners as, according to Prymachuk et al. (2009), they are generally more motivated than students from traditional HE participation backgrounds and more likely to complete their studies and to do so with a higher grade. The positive motivation of the student participants to their HE in FE study was very evident, even though they had dropped out:

I did enjoy it and I would have liked to complete (Lana)

I don't regret the time I spent there (Valentina)

Staff participant SSO Mike concurred with this view of older students:

Even if they haven't got a lesson, they [older students] will come in, so they have got that dedicated time to work. And the students have managed to work that round their jobs as well. (SSO, Mike)

Mature students have got emotional capabilities but the younger students at 18 they are used to getting things given to them (Tutor Dee)

Part-time students they are more mature, had work life experience...you can see the difference, those that have been working and those that haven't They are immediately relating the theory they can see it all its click, click, click. (Tutor Stella)

Mature students, in my experience are very hot on organisation and management (Tutor Martin)

Schoon and Bryner (2003) suggest that students from low socioeconomic groups are less likely to be resilient enough to overcome difficulties they encounter with their HE studies. This did not seem to be supported by the student responses. Rather, as Prymachuk et al. (2009) suggested, motivation to study amongst older students was strong. In the case of Jake, this was despite his health problems. Other students, such as Lana, also found their courses hard, but persisted, *'I was still doing the work and turning up; it's just that at times it was difficult'* (Lana)

Therefore, given the likely high levels of motivation, amongst adult learners may mean they could be easier to support than younger learners, despite their expectations as student consumers (Prymachuk et al. 2009).

The patterns of course delivery are decided by FE departments and managers, influenced by government priorities, often without direct input from the tutors or students they concern. As Sperlinger et al. (2018) highlighted, course delivery needs to be more sympathetic to WP students; this was difficult for some of the students. Julia's frustration was that the course structure seemed to revolve around tight deadlines and rigid attendance patterns which are a closer match to the availability of full-time students in HEIs. When discussing her frustration with timetabling, she points out that it may have better suited, *'... others younger on the course and other people who might have had more flexibility.'* (Julia)

In addition, significant health problems made Ellie's life more difficult for her to adjust to inflexible approaches to course delivery, *'Appointments and things that were made were not catered to'* [by Northsall] (Ellie).

And Valentina found that that inflexible expectations of attendance did not help childcare, an issue which was also identified by some of the staff participants:

personal issues which may be relationship break down or maybe childcare (SSO June)

...being a single parent and issues with childcare (SSO Sally)

Valentina highlights the position of WP students who are caught in the tension between what FEIs can provide for WP students and what those students require. Government financial incentives to FEIs favour limited delivery patterns and larger class sizes (Watt and Paterson, 2010). This is in a climate of reduced funding for access programmes, the very provision intended to facilitate WP student progression to HE (AoC, 2018). This seems to be supported by three of the students who all felt unprepared for the degree course they enrolled on. Kane, in particular, must have needed such provision as he went back to level 2 study after leaving his course. This lack of preparation can mean students are unable to meet the demands of higher education study; this was noted by both staff and student participants:

There was a lot more written work involved than I expected (Ellie)

I think the only problem was really the workload which was a lot. (Gill)

I think level 3 courses might touch on referencing and you might tell them about study skills and time management which is absolutely essential but when they actually transfer to the higher education, to the level 4 I think the jump is quite a big jump. (Tutor Dee)

Widening Participation students are more likely to study part time and be older learners, which complicates their relationship with resilience, and this may in turn derail HE study. They may be more vulnerable to life experiences, which stress their resilience, and this may scupper their retention on programme. This includes financial hardship, negotiating the culture of the HE learning environment and their new identity as an HE student, as well as managing their responsibilities outside college (Reay et al., 2001a; Bennett, 2010). If they do manage to overcome any life adversity they face, there will be substantial benefits to their general well-being (Gu and Day, 2006; Grey, 2015). Expecting WP students to be resilient in the face of such wide-ranging difficulties, as Garrett (2015) suggests, may well be an unreasonable expectation which over-extends their resilience and would be better addressed by the HE institution adapting more substantially to the needs of their WP students. The ability of FEIs to do this is likely to be compromised by lack of funding since 2010 which, Brehoney and Deem (2005) suggest has constrained the efforts of HE institutions to engage WP students fully.

Family responsibilities and lack of experience of HE, can combine to create stressors. This is often due to being from the first generation to attend an HE course. Such an experience is more common in WP cohorts of HE in FE students (Gill, 2016). These possible stressors which could mean leaving their degree course will be considered in the next section.

4.3.2 Family, community and first generation HE

If a student encounters a serious and unexpected circumstance from their family or life outside the college, they can reach breaking point and drop out of their course (Hedberg

and Tone, 2014). This additional stressor affected seven out of ten student participants in the research:

The course itself was fine. I just have a lot of issues outside of it which is obviously really difficult because there's a lot of work involved. (Lana)

I have kids and I was working as well so all that really. (Valentina)

My Mum went critical in about November and went back into hospital and in [nearby city], so I had to travel to [nearby city] every day and it just became too much (Julia)

The SSO staff participants also thought that responsibilities outside of the college could impact on the ability of HE students to stay:

Personal issues which may be relationship break down, maybe childcare because it broke down as the person who was going to provide the childcare is no longer able to. (SSO June)

A single parent and issues with childcare as a big thing, a big risk factor because then they, understandably, are dealing with kids being ill and all the rest of it so that it leads to a drop in attendance and engagement. (SSO Sally)

The SSOs seem objective about family responsibilities, but Tutor Martin seems to suggest an important component of student resilience is for students to be able to manage their personal lives themselves:

I think when you [the student] recognise, ok I'm in a different kind of setting now and you just get on with it, that's kind of resilience to me. If they are able to do what's required of them whilst also managing what's going on in the background. (Tutor Martin)

Tutor Dee seems the most student centred. She clearly lays out her expectations that tutors should be responsive to student need:

[Tutors should have] a general supportive, empathetic overview of people a lot of the students come from widening participation and they have a lot of commitments and emotional commitments as well. (Tutor Dee)

Social class and disadvantage can lead to disengagement and underachievement (Archer et al., 2005). It is suggested that previous experience of HE in the family is positively correlated with both application to degree courses and to successful outcomes (Gayle et al., 2002). Previous experience of HE in the family was low amongst the student cohort. Only four out of ten students reported previous HE experiences for either themselves or within the family, and two of those were their own experience of HE which suggests they are the first generation of potential graduates within their family:

I can think of students [whose] parents haven't gone into higher education and they may be in an environment where everyone is working in trades (SSO Sally)

Gayle et al. (2002) also suggests that students from non-graduate backgrounds find entering HE more challenging than those who have graduate parents. This suggests that HE in FE is expanding the opportunities for WP learners to enter HE level study (BIS, 2014). This is supported by the rationale behind SSO June's current role which she says is:

To increase retention, achievement, attainment and facilitate in students from lower socioeconomic classes, students with a learning difficulty or with a mental health issue and looking at the data...there's a particular emphasis on young, white males. (SSO June)

It is suggested that HE needs to respond to the needs of adult learners and adapt ways of delivering and working to meet the needs of WP students who may require part time study (Sperlinger et al., 2018). Tutor Dee seems to go further by providing personal and emotional support, as suggested by Bowl (2001), as important to a learning relationship and is also an important source of bolstering to a HE in FE student's personal resilience.

Following the introduction of student loans after 1991, concern grew within Government and those directly involved in Higher Education, that it would affect retention and achievement in the sector (Davies, 1999). The impact on the students of their financial commitment to study will now be considered.

4.3.3 Finance

Data from the research does not seem to suggest that financial reasons are important to the students (Bennett, 2010). This is because none of them suggested finances as the main reason for leaving and only four mentioned it negatively. Perhaps it is more likely to be a barrier to participating in HE, rather than in staying and completing their course (McGivney, 1996). Leah speaks of how she was content to pay, but her leaving was more to do with feeling that the product did not match the cost:

Was it worth the money that I was paying? Well, I wasn't receiving anything.
(Leah)

Overall, finances seem to be an exacerbating issue for HE in FE students, rather than being decisive in retention. Four of the students were concerned about paying back their student loans (Bennett, 2010). As Gill says, *'One thing that worries me is student finance'*.

Leah and Valentina also took paid employment alongside their studies to support their living costs whilst studying and Valentina mentioned having to reduce her hours. Gilborn and Mirza (2000) suggested that WP students may have to challenge their own values about getting into debt in order to study. The staff participants were divided regarding the importance of individual student finance. Some felt, contrary to the ex-students, that it can be decisive in their reasons for leaving:

Finances comes up that actually in the end they can't afford to do the programme (SSO June).

Tutor Martin felt strongly that earning money was more of a priority than their HE course for the students he taught at Northsall. For him, it was not so much that they could not afford the course but more that they either could not afford to not work, or they would prefer to work:

It comes back to this necessity for employment because of their financial backgrounds... they see being a student as a fall-back position if you can't get a job (Tutor Martin)

Tutor Dee also recognises the impact that not working can have on younger students:

If they are from a school where generally their peers are going into work, then clearly that will impact on the student. I have actually had quite a few students who didn't have the support of their parents. They've come to college and it doesn't matter how clever they are or how well they are doing, you need to get some money and they've left. And they have not been able to see that longevity in what they are doing. (Tutor Dee)

By contrast, SSOs Mike and Sally seem to see WP students' attitude to the financial cost of study as more of an additional stressor, than the deciding factor in withdrawal, '...I don't know if it is financially. I don't really hear that so much now.' (SSO Mike)

SSO Sally felt that students may not take the financial commitment they are making seriously enough, which would support SSO Mike's assertion about finances becoming less of a consideration for HE in FE students:

I work with people who just sign up on the day and for me that's quite shocking that people are committing to a contract, that they are laying out a lot of money... There should be a week's thinking space with a mid-way phone chat with somebody before they are able to start. (SSO Sally)

Callender (1999) suggested that student finance may be a small incentive for students to stay on their programme of study and a factor in retention. There is some support for this from Gill and Kane:

One thing that worries me is student finance because I have to pay that back straight away with me leaving. (Gill)

I knew that I would be liable to pay a certain amount of money to student finance [on leaving]. (Kane)

Overall, the findings of the research seem to suggest that student fee payment is less important than what is going on inside FEIs as a factor in student retention. Davies (2000) and Martinez (2001) investigated the impact of student fees in HE and Jephcote and Raby (2012) researched student fee payment in FE. Both found that finance is less important than factors within HEIs themselves. This would seem to fit with the students' initial decisions to study and incur fees which took place before any difficulty was encountered in the college.

The marketisation of FE means that the mechanism by which funding is received involves attracting, retaining and ensuring the completion of their students' study and qualifications (Smith, 2015). It is the ramifications of this policy as a stressor on HE in FE student resilience and retention which will now be considered in the participant responses.

4.3.4 Marketisation and management

What Further Education colleges can provide is controlled by the funding they receive from government and any other income they receive from fees and independent funding applications, although in reality, the majority is from government funding (Smith, 2007a).

The impact of marketisation and ‘policy levers’ previously mentioned are left to individual colleges to manage (Spours et al., 2008). The responsibility for the college’s response to quality initiatives is taken by middle and senior managers (Smith, 2007a). This has led to departmental and tutor accountability for student retention which can constrain learning and distort the philosophy of education for personal improvement, reducing it to acquiring a qualification (Nixon et al., 2018). Students can perceive themselves as consumers who should have the ability to steer policy through their patronage of the institution (Maringe, 2006). This can be illusory as their power to change policy and practice within FEIs is constrained by Governmental funding and accountability (Hodgson, 2015). As Woodall et al. (2014) suggest, the contrasting perspective of some colleges’ management is that they have a right to manage courses without the accountability to students which they seem to expect of staff.

In this post-austerity financial climate, FE management priorities are not singular, but may encompass efficiency savings, retention and achievement targets, to optimise income, and ensuring student satisfaction (Hodgson, 2015). These may also need to be reconciled with requirements from senior management to be flexible and find ways to address what Smith (2007a: 65) calls ‘*dual motivations*’. This is a dilemma SSO Mike, who is also an FE manager, knows well:

The tension for me is because I have to manage the financial side of it... we [staff] don't work in a vacuum (SSO Mike)

Within Northsall, HE in FE provision is comparatively well funded compared with other areas of college business (College Contribution Report, October 2013). Its importance is as an area of income-generating business, which managers like SSO Mike are well aware of:

HE is a key area of business that we can grow because there's not a limit on it. Most other sources of funding in a college are limited so you can't grow them in the same way. (SSO Mike)

In this example, SSO Mike uses the language of business and commerce, indicating a common quasi marketing perspective. This underpins the accountability that creates the conflict between teaching and management about funding priorities. Further Education level courses are not funded as well as HE in FE. HE funding can be stretched, often to support Further Education provision (Woodall et al., 2014). Financial pressures have a significant role in colleges:

I think sometimes they [college senior management] don't emphasise enough the kind of financial responsibility that we [Staff] have (SSO Mike)

The responsibility SSO Mike describes for recruitment, retention and certification is likened by Bloomer (1998) to a treadmill, which constrains tutors' professional judgement and sometimes they may misjudge or face constraints which are too great.

There are also stressors from the potential dichotomy between expectations of degree validating partners, the former Curriculum and Qualifications Authority (QCA) and the auditing requirements of funding bodies. SSO Mike obviously felt the tension between management expectations and staff concern with funding constraints (Simkins and Lumby, 2006). His position as a middle manager put him squarely in the position of mediating Glogowska et al.'s (2007:63) 'push' of validation requirements and the 'pull' of funding efficiency requirements:

I think she [Mike's member of staff] felt I was only interested in the money and that wasn't the case but at the time, that was a major concern. I think it was seen [by her] as not valuing the quality of what we did. (SSO Mike)

SSO June, previously a manager in a HEI, confirmed this divergence between teaching and supporting students and being a manager as two mutually exclusive activities with different priorities, when she talks about her decision to become an SSO:

I thought I'd like to do something with students that gets me right back to being an academic rather than a manager and actually helps students achieve, rather than doing damage limitation.... I don't want to be a manager anymore. Been there, done that, got the T-shirt and you can have it back. (SSO June)

Students enter their courses with high expectations about what Northsall can offer, akin to purchasing a product and ensuring they receive value for money (Radice, 2013). Leah's expectations were for, '100 per cent' effort on the part of the tutors' (Leah). Students, such as Leah, mainly engage with college finance when it affects them directly and when the impact is felt by them:

I was thinking well, if you feel that way, [about providing a service] you're not going to get my money then and that's how I felt really. (Leah)

In conclusion, budget decisions in FEIs are often made by those who are not directly teaching the students (Leader, 2004). It is not difficult to see how keeping up with all student expectations can be impossible when Government accountability to student experience is externalised. For example, in National Student Survey (NSS) results and subsequent league tables can detrimentally affect future recruitment (Bates and Kaye, 2014). The difficulty is that the type or quality of resources provided by Northsall is subjective and it is very difficult for management, staff or students to judge what is acceptable or possible within current funding regimes (Tomlinson, 2014). Middle managers try to mediate between the demands of validating partners, student expectations and requirements, the demands of teaching staff and those of senior managers, with the dominant power resting with the latter. This creates a business orientated, rather than an

educational culture (Leader, 2004; Smith, 2015). The staff, in turn, may adopt the students' point of view about what resources they might expect to receive but are disempowered to express such opinions to FE managers (Unwin in Derrick et al., 2010). Some students will have higher expectations than others about the level of service which should be provided. When the difference between challenges and absence of resources becomes too imbalanced, then the students experience too much stress to their resilience and may leave. This is a situation exacerbated by students, who are often the least powerful voice in the system and who are often poorly informed about what is possible with the funding which Government provides (LeGrand et al., 2008). Students are receiving confusing messages from social media, Government rhetoric and FEI publicity that they can and should be able to command FE college policy (Molesworth et al., 2010). The 'front-line', human face of this becomes tutors and those staff who attempt to manage student expectations through the relationships they have formed with them.

Government expects FEIs to meet the skills and training needs of employers (BIS, 2014). However, achieving this can be far from straightforward (Smith, 2007a). This possible factor in HE in FE student withdrawal as the pressure of employment and employers' expectations can place additional stress on personal resilience. This will now be considered in the participant's responses.

4.3.5 Employer influence through the student's learning journey

The Government assumes that employers will work with colleges and that they should be making allowances for student study commitments, rather than the other way around (BIS, 2014). This is a viewpoint shared by college managers such as Mike:

I think it's getting that support from their employer ... that can make a real difference.
(SSO Mike)

The rationale for the introduction of Foundation Degrees (FD) in 2001 was to meet the needs of employers as, '*...the qualification should be organised around occupational requirements rather than academic subjects...*' (Harvey, 2009:8). It was also to upskill a developing 'technician' role and offer a more varied picture of employer involvement (Edmond and Price, 2009). In reality, there are very few students who have their study needs accommodated by being allocated time off to study and even less who have their fees paid by employers.

In defence of employers, there is often a lack of clarity around a pedagogy and how a relationship between employers and HE providers should work (Boud and Symes, 2000). In this environment, the support of employers is necessarily going to be difficult to achieve and sustain. This can lead to limiting the career progression and aspirations of widening participation learners (Archer et al., 2005).

This is highlighted by Leah who discusses her current position within her own 'learning trajectory' (Gorard and Rees, 2002); completing a course often benefits career plans and aspirations:

It's such a shame because I enjoyed it and I really really wanted to do it because it helps your progress in the health and social sector. (Leah)

Schuller and Watson (2007) suggest that HE in FE has a responsibility to support employment up-skilling, rather than student career aspirations and see the lifelong learning sector as key to supplying the right skills to industry. However, Sperlinger (2018)

maintains that delivery of it needs to be flexible, which is counter to many current Further Education managers:

We don't generally recommend students' progress straight from level 3 to foundation degree. I don't think that's really what it's [Higher Education in Further Education] designed for. You need a few years with your professional practice under your belt.
(SSO Mike)

If the Higher Education course on which the student is studying is successful in upskilling for the sector in which they work, the irony is that they may then become attractive to employers and leave before completion:

...some of the student's attitudes was, if they hadn't secured full time employment before finishing their studies it was like, 'Aw, I've ended up with a degree!'
(Tutor Martin)

They might receive better offers of employment, more hours or promotion which again comes back to the demographic of people that we live with. People can't refuse money sometimes, can they? (SSO Sally)

This could be attributed to skills gained on the course but also, perhaps indirectly, that they have gained wider employability skills during their study. This contradicts Wilton (2011) who believes the curriculum is deficient for HE students in this respect. This research suggests that even those students who left are gaining something positive from their HE in FE experiences beyond achieving their qualifications:

I learned something about myself from doing that course (Kane).

I think I've learned pretty much what I needed (Valentina)

It may be that courses do not need to be coherently linked to the needs of industry to be successful, according to Kennedy (1997) and the DFE in their report, 'Further education: raising skills, improving life chances' (2006). Of the student participants, Ross said he left to

gain employment. His job offer came after leaving the course, rather than an employer tempting him away. Two others were continuing with employment. The remainder of the ex-students did not mention employment as a reason for leaving. This position seems to be supported by Davies (2000) who is cynical about the effect of employment on student withdrawal as their study indicated that it is not the main factor. Additionally, according to Watt and Paterson (2010), alleviating financial hardship through employment will not necessarily prevent withdrawal. This seems to be supported by Tutor Martin's view of his students that their lack of identification with being a HE student means they would rather be employed than study.

The needs and availability of, student, employer and college must harmonise, to enable the student to study effectively. The volatile nature of the economy combined with individual employer's business planning, must be considered alongside the lives of the more mature students themselves. The learning journeys found within, often, part-time, WP cohorts are often different to those of full-time students and reflect changing motivations and availability throughout their lives (Martinez and Munday, 1998). SSO Mike's belief in employer, rather than college, flexibility, does not consider employers' needs for course responsiveness and flexibility (Sperlinger et al., 2018).

The next chapter, is a distillation of the themes, which have been highlighted within the findings and discussion, to present conclusions and address the third RQ: *What are the implications for FEIs and practitioners to effectively support Higher Education in Further Education students to complete their degree level studies?*

Chapter 5: Conclusions and implications for practice

5.1 Conclusions

In addressing the research questions 1 and 2, it is important to note the interaction of a number of contested concepts which have informed the research. The most notable of these is resilience. The concept can be understood as, potentially, an enabling force to support completion of, HE in FE study. However, it is important to also consider the combined impact of ambiguous concepts such as widening participation and marketisation which can change the meaning of resilience from benign to potentially exploitative of student and tutor endeavour. This will be explored further in this chapter.

The diagram in Figure 3, below, summarises the themes which emerged from the research as having the potential to affect the HE in FE student's learning experience. This list is not intended to be exhaustive; -it concentrates on the most relevant factors, from the research findings.

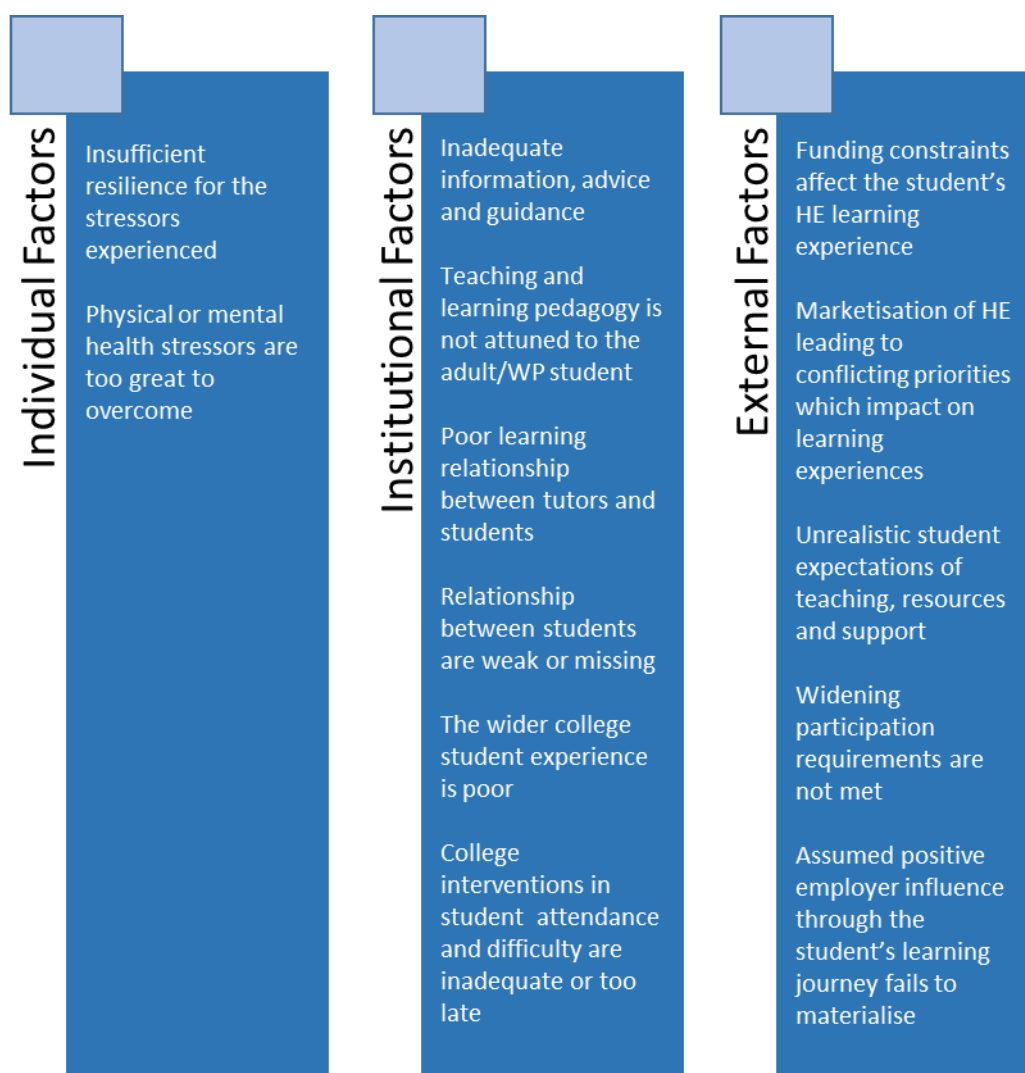


Figure 3: Three overarching themes and sub themes affecting students' ability to be resilient and retained on HE in FE programmes.

It would be reasonable to assume that those factors relating to the institution of Northsall would be the easiest to influence. However, the mediating factor between all the reasons students give for withdrawal is the individual resilience of the student themselves, which can fluctuate due to innate and environmental factors. As Sameroff (1991) suggested about the effects of environment, genes and individual personality on child development, the overarching factors identified in Figure 3 are also transactional. The number of stressors students face at any one time from any domain in their life, be it employment, family commitments, health or study will transact dynamically with their own resilience

levels to create their current level of personal resilience (Eisenburg et al., 2009; HEFCE, 2017). This is why two students with, apparently, similar backgrounds, circumstances and abilities will face similar difficulties either from HE in FE study or in their personal lives, but one will be able to overcome them to achieve their degree qualification and the other will not (Rutter, 2012). Therefore, students themselves are the best guide as to when and how they may need support with their resilience.

However, concepts employed within the research which bear closer inspection include resilience, widening participation and marketisation, as a policy of neoliberalism. They will be examined in the following sections.

5.1.1 External factors influencing student resilience (policy context)

To address research question 1, the student participants' experiences of Northsall and support they had been offered was varied. Out of the ten, four reported negative experiences, two reported positive ones and four felt that their experiences were mixed.

There is evidence that some sectors within society, termed widening participation groups and suggested by Cornell-Smith and Hubble (2018:4) as having, '...*disadvantaged backgrounds, lower income households, care-leavers, mature students, disabled students and students from some ethnic groups*...' are under-represented in the UK FE system (McGivney, 1996; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). Widening participation students, who are the majority at Northsall, are often resilient but they still experience a dissonance with HE culture (Kennedy, 1997; Pryjmachuk et al., 2009). However, it should also be noted that

exactly who WP students are and also how to increase their participation is contentious and sometimes unclear (Gorard, 2007).

Widening participation students are necessarily in a disadvantaged position with regard to their ability to navigate both Higher Education itself, and the complexities brought about by neoliberalism and the introduction of quasi markets as marketisation. These complexities include quality assurance systems, finance, support and the quality of teaching and learning (Hodgson, 2015). These are interpreted within individual colleges, by their management team to form the social processes created by freewill and structure as the environment of the college, expressed by Reay et al. (2001a) as 'habitus'. Management of FEIs can be without reference to either students or staff (Woodall et al., 2014). This was noted by SSO Mike as a tension between both his business and financial responsibilities and HE teaching and learning, '*...we're really managing a business...*' (SSO Mike). He also noted the conflict this could cause with staff:

I think it [decisions to cut services] was seen [by staff] as not valuing the quality of what we did. (SSO Mike).

The complexities of HE in FE provision can involve a number of factors which WP students are often ill-equipped to navigate (Le Grand et al., 2008). Expectations of attendance and timetabling do not always fit with their life commitments (Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 2000; Sperlinger et al., 2018). As Valentina says, '*I have kids and I was working as well*'. WP students are often obligated to their employers through their contract of employment as many undertake part- or full-time work and they do not study out of choice. This is a disincentive to WP students to study due to the burden which the financial commitment of loans places upon them (Bowl, 2001); '*I knew that I would be liable to pay a certain amount*

of money to student finance' (Kane). Power differentials within society mean WP or disadvantaged student groups can be expected to take personal responsibility for their engagement within Higher Education (Le Grand et al., 2008). In the climate of neoliberalism, and especially after the 2010 financial contraction, there seems to be something wrong with the system. This can mean that marketisation and the concept of resilience are open to abuse by managers or Government who may wish to blame the students for dropping out.

HE in FE students who are now influenced by marketisation to be consumers and believe they have the opportunity to influence college provision, understandably often believe they should choose what, when and how to study (Elias and Purcell, 2004). However, this is against a backdrop of the coalition Government's 'austerity' measures which mean FEIs are not usually in a position to offer additional resource allocation, such as providing extra staffing (Smith, 2015; AoC, in Evans, 2015). Such changes would mean redirecting resources from other courses resulting in understaffing or resourcing. Nonetheless, FEIs are providers who need to attract students, their publicity will often portray a bountiful, well equipped and responsive HE provision. This can easily disappoint students who feel that sometimes FE provision does vary from that publicised (Molesworth et al., 2010).

Attempts to widen participation, whilst laudable, seem to fall prey to the same resistance which impacts on equity and social justice within UK society as a whole. A demarcation of social disadvantage and the focus of WP measures used between those students who complete their education at secondary or FE level and those who continue to HE. That same marker of disadvantage seems to have moved and is now between Russell group and

'other' universities. Gorard (2010) suggests that there is some progress towards the equalisation of education outcomes within compulsory education, and movement away from Bernstein's (1970) famous assessment which means education may; - in future be able to compensate for society through widening participation to expand the percentage of the population with a degree. With participation in HE in the UK at almost 50 per cent (DfE, 2019), the social difference is not whether you have a degree, but at which HEI that degree was obtained. Perhaps continuing attempts to address inequalities in UK HE can mitigate some disadvantage experienced by WP students. This could be achieved by presenting a statement of intent and continuing commitment to try and understand and improve participation, retention and achievement for under-represented groups in the UK education system. An intention which is yet to be fully realised but is committed to through continuing attempts to equalise access and participation. The next section will summarise how institutional factors within Northsall can influence HE in FE student resilience.

5.1.2 Institutional factors influencing student resilience (the student's learning journey)

Tension can be caused between what is best for the student and what is available at Northsall, or any other FEI. Julia's pre-course advice was poor, as the content of the course was not what she had said she wanted because of late course changes, she was influenced by her tutors to take an alternative which did not meet her needs:

...it really wasn't the course I was supposed to do ...because we didn't have the top ups in [previous foundation degree course] (Julia)

Julia was almost tricked by tutors into taking the wrong course, because tutors were placed between providing a suitable course for Julia and management decisions to reduce provision (Archer et al., 2005; Willetts, 2017). Kane had the entry requirements for the course but struggled with the level of work. Valentina also seemed to be influenced to take a course which did not quite meet her needs, as the story of her experiences in Chapter 4 notes:

I wish I could have...joined another course...it wasn't really the course I was supposed to do (Valentina).

Three of the ten students experienced shortcomings in the IAG they received.

The interaction between students and tutors is important to their learning and the research suggests it seems more important than the application of a specific pedagogy (Cohen et al., 2011). There is a tension in HE and FE study between tutors trying to develop the independent learning skills of students which are traditionally associated with HE study and the expectations of fee-paying students to be treated as consumers (Ballantyne et al., 2002). As Leah asserts in chapter 4, *'Was it worth the money that I was paying? Well, I wasn't receiving anything'* (Leah).

Challenge within learning experiences must be at a level the student can cope with (Neil and Dias, 2001). As Jake asserts:

Look I'm trying to keep up, and then it just got to the point where I said to them [tutors], enough's enough, I can't do this (Jake)

Otherwise, even further pressure will be exerted on the, possibly already strained, ability of the student to be resilient enough to stay on the programme.

There may be problems if tutors try to replicate their perception of, HE practice, which expects higher levels of autonomous learning. In fact, HE pedagogy is moving closer to FE pedagogical practice, which emphasises a closer relationship with the tutor and increased support for the student (Hawley and Harris, 2005; Feather, 2010). However, on balance, FE does seem to have retained its greater emphasis on relationships with students (Jephcote et al., 2008) and Salisbury et al., (2006). SSO June, having worked in both HEIs and FEIs, is uniquely placed to note this and also that this relationship is partly because HE students have often already been in the college following level 3 courses before the HE course:

The tutor-student relationship in FE is stronger than HE... because a lot of them have progressed from level 3... (SSO June)

What is apparent; - is the tutor's desire to help students achieve, whatever their approach. Such relationships may actually form an unlikely antidote to the excesses of a quasi-marketised system as tutors or SSOs are best placed to both support students and manage their expectations as consumers.

Relationships which students form with their peers were not particularly significant for any of the ten student participants. However, it may be that this was because the students took peer relationships 'as read'. This missed opportunity for mutual support may have made a difference, which may have helped them to stay the course. (Ikiz and Cakar, 2010; Onyishi and Ogbodo, 2012).

The wider services and environment of Northsall College were important to the students' learning journey. The main reason Leah gave for leaving was because she could not get support from IT services and the library to access course materials. This demonstrates that wider college staff may appear casual and not proactive in their support role. Wider college support for staff may be insensitive to this requirement of their job simply because they had too much work since cuts in funding and increases in their workload and role responsibilities (Fullan, 2002; Leader, 2004). It could also be a mismatch between the expectations of students to receive a level of support, promised through marketing and publicity, but unsupported by current resources.

Declining attendance may signpost the difficulties students may be experiencing (Porter, 2008, O'Donnell, 2009). None of the students recognised this symptom. However, all the staff recognised the importance of monitoring attendance as pointing to disengagement from study. Because of their commitments beyond college, full attendance may be unrealistic for a WP student (Paisey and Paisey, 2003). Therefore, the relationship between tutor or SSO and student will be important to ensuring that the individual circumstances of students are considered when assessing the significance of absence. Declining attendance needs picking up quickly in order to be effective in retaining the student (O'Donnell, 2009; Park et al., 2011).

The impact of quasi-markets and funding cuts, increasing after 2010, and support for widening participation students through bolstering resilience to encourage retention seems due at least in part to be the result of the effectiveness of the relationship between

staff and students. Tutors, like Dee, exemplify a close relationship between tutor and student:

It's the understanding and it's the support you bring to that person but also to the class (Tutor Dee)

This support for students can be hard for tutors within current funding constraints (Tomlinson, 2014):

The way we support [students] is in terms of tutorials but it is quite difficult you know because it's having the time (Tutor Stella)

FEIs are left with an unenviable task; - to provide for HE in FE students with a level of service which will be enough to ensure WP students can be supported by tutors to succeed (Keep, 2014; Hodgson et al., 2015). The financial imperatives were clearly laid out by manager Mike:

When I started back [in his current role], I was concerned about the numbers declining and financially, the curriculum area we were very very vulnerable and if we are vulnerable financially then ultimately that makes the whole thing vulnerable, that's everybody's jobs vulnerable and I needed to start and say if you don't get more students..., I mean I wouldn't do it that crudely, but the reality is... (SSO Mike)

In this climate, it is likely that students may leave because of insufficient support and resources to meet their needs or face challenges to their resilience which may be beyond local FEIs to address. Initiating a facilitated assessment of stressors and enablers with the student may help to remedy any difficulty as early as possible in the student's learning journey (Hedberg and Tone, 2014). It could both empower students by familiarising them with the term resilience and open conversations with staff about any current difficulty affecting their study. The remaining overarching factors which affect resilience are those factors which are individual to the student.

5.1.3 Individual resilience and retention

Turning to the second research question, strong resilience is more likely to enable a student to withstand whatever difficulties they encounter and ensure a successful completion to their learning journey (Gu and Day, 2006). However, resilience is an individual characteristic; what is a stressor to one person can be a stimulus to another (Rutter, 2012).

Resilience is a concept and a way to explain why some people can extend their effort to achieve a goal whilst others do not. Resilience stressors and enablers act like weights on a balance and are located around different domains of life (Bergmann et al. 2019). This explanation may be helpful, but it only deals with the concept of resilience at a relatively superficial level. It does not explain where the demarcation should be for the maximum effort an individual needs to make. This means that it is open to interpretation and possible abuse by staff who simply want students to continue expending effort beyond what is reasonable and possible (Canavan, 2007). It also has potential for victim blaming; when those who are not judged to be resilient may be judged to be at fault. Consideration of the significance of resilience to HE in FE students, needs to be with the caveat that it is open to abuse by managers and others to justify reducing resources and support for students. This is particularly important to WP students who may therefore be more vulnerable to stress from the 'habitus' of a HE environment (Reay et al., 2001a).

There seems to be a sensitive period for students, whose resilience is overstretched and nearing breaking point, which is just before they make the decision to leave, and when they do all that they can to stay. Julia, Lana and Jake are good examples of this, increasing their effort until they had exhausted themselves:

I tried to hold it together, but I couldn't. I thought, do you know, I'm just going to have to let it go. (Julia).

And as previously noted from Jake:

Look I'm trying to keep up, and then it just got to the point where I said to them [tutors], enough's enough, I can't do this (Jake)

When earlier signs of disengagement have been missed, some concerted support may encourage students to stay. If there was a checklist for staff and students in the tutorial system, which involved students in checking their own support needs, this may reduce drop out (Rovai, 2002; Park et al., 2011).

General wellbeing is important to successful study (Prichard and Wilson, 2003; Theodoratou et al., 2016). Poor physical health of a student or their family can impact on whether students stay or leave the course, although this is not well researched.

Amongst the student participants, poor physical health was a main reason why three out of ten left their courses. Bergmann et al. (2019) noted that when one or more 'domains of life' are affected, this reduces the student's overall ability to stay resilient. This may be the best explanation of how physical ill health leads to student drop out. Serious and unexpected ill health is a major stressor which is difficult to overcome and will require a lot of resilience, as Jake noted:

I think it's made me more determined knowing that these health issues have hampered me... (Jake)

Mental health is a growing concern to everyone working in education and was the main reason why three of the ten student participants dropped out of their studies (Aronin, 2016). Poor mental health may best be understood in conjunction with the concept of resilience (Hedberg and Tone., 2014; Binnie, 2017). Gilborn and Mirza's (2000) assertion that mental ill health is a cause or somehow linked to poor resilience runs counter to Binnie (2017) who suggests that people facing mental health problems may be more resilient in order to cope with such a major life stressor. None of the three students felt their course directly 'caused' their mental ill health. They felt their ill health was triggered by changes in their own lives:

It wasn't the course itself that made me leave, it was my mental health that made me really poorly... (Gill)

However, poor mental health still carries some stigma which can lead to non-disclosure. Lack of funding could be a barrier to offering individual, institutional support (Quinn et al., 2008; Tomlinson, 2014). Poor tutor or other staff support for students because of the lack of resources in the currently challenging funding climate is likely. This could mean that the resilience needed to overcome barriers to undertake HE in FE study is too great (Garrett, 2015). Good practice ideas to support student mental health include therapeutic education which may support FEIs. This is especially pertinent to tackling mental health through education during the current pandemic (MHFE, 2015).

5.2 Implications for practice

The third research question is: *‘What are the implications for FEIs of effectively supporting Higher Education in Further Education students to complete their degree level studies?’*

Caution is needed in drawing firm recommendations from such a small sample, since the study does not enable robust generalisation to all FEIs (See sections; 3.3.3 and 3.7.3, for a fuller discussion). However, there are some interesting themes which have emerged from factors within Northsall on the student’s learning journey, which could suggest implications for practice and lead to further research.

Capital represents accumulated labour in either a physical or embodied form (Bourdieu, 1986: 241). Bourdieu identified three types of capital which individuals within a society may possess; - economic capital, concerned with wealth; cultural capital, which relates to knowledge and confers privileged position and social capital involving securing privilege through social groupings and interpersonal relationships (Bourdieu, 1986: 243).

More recently, Poole (2019) added the concept of ‘resilience capital’ which concerns adopting a more positive attitude to experiences which could be uncertain or dubious in outcome. A connection can be made between resilience capital as a concept and what the research has found can support students with the building of their resilience. Poole’s (2019) research was published more recently, and it is interesting and relevant as an additional way to understand how resilience is operating as weights on a balance and, as such, worth consideration within the conclusion. However, it has not been included earlier in the thesis because it is not central to a fuller understanding of how resilience is significant to retention for, HE in FE students and understanding the variety of external,

internal and individual factors which impact upon the wider student experience and how the toolkit can support students with their resilience. Poole suggests that resilience can be produced by tutors taking the lead by framing ambiguous experiences as positive for students. This would mean tutors being proactive in their relationships with students. Using a method such as the retention 'tool kit' (outlined below) to facilitate this may be helpful.

5.2.1 The proposed retention 'toolkit': stage 1: discussion and flow chart

The 'toolkit' could be a staged process which would afford the opportunity to empower students by raising awareness of their own resilience. The 'toolkit' could start with a class discussion about resilience and what it might mean; which would enable students to counter any attempt to extend their resilience undesirably by staff or the college. It is important for the process to be empowering for all students, but especially a WP learner.

The retention 'toolkit' flow chart (figure 4, below) is a representation of the potential influence of resilience on the individual student's learning journey. It is intended to support an initial conversation and discussion with staff about resilience and student retention. The self-assessment checklist could be used with the student and then assessed in the light of this flow chart by the tutor.

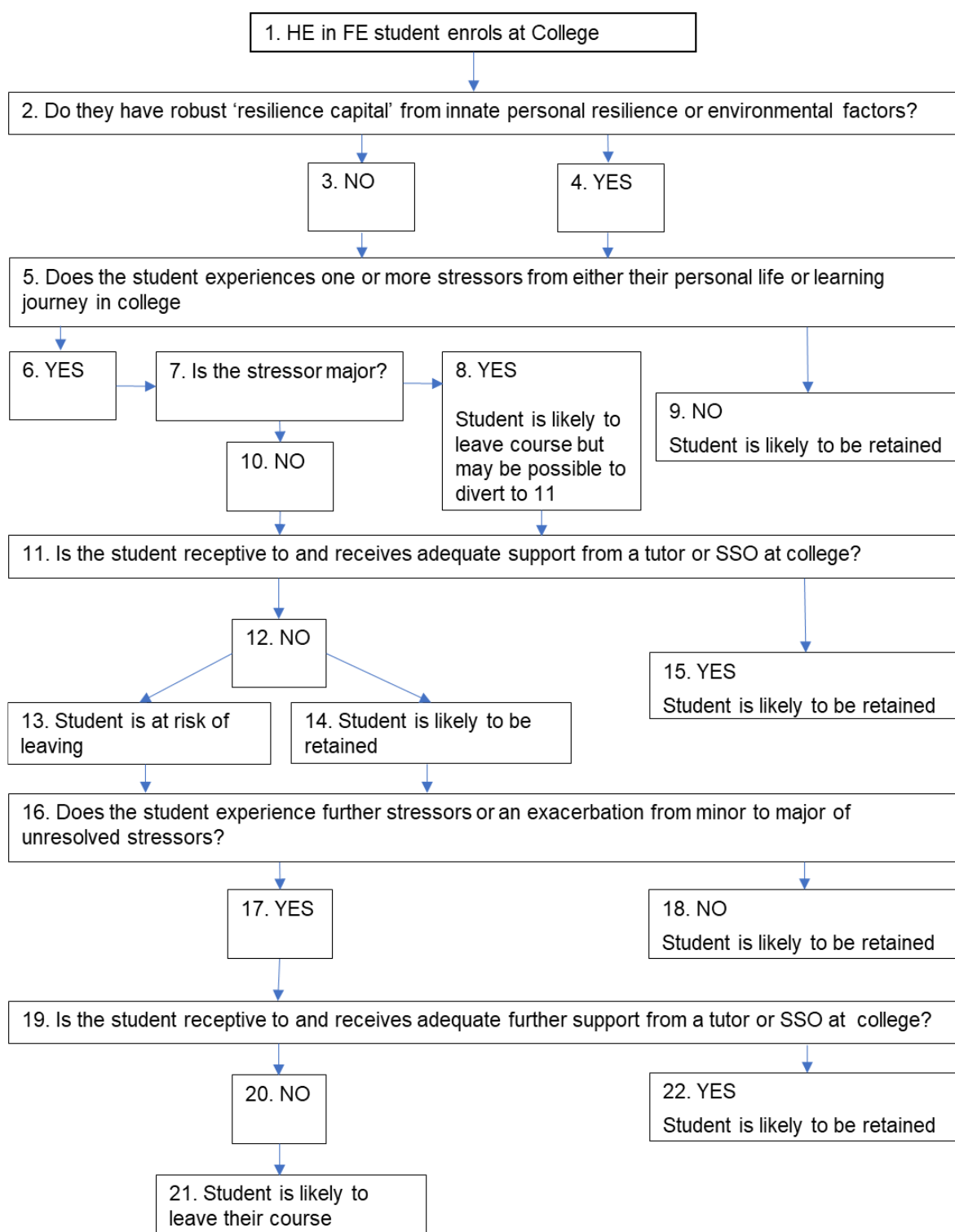


Figure 4: A flow chart showing how factors may impact on the resilience of HE in FE students.

On the chart, a student enrolls for their HE in FE study with varying amounts of 'resilience capital' from innate and environmental factors (Poole, 2019). For WP students, this may be impacted upon by impoverished cultural capital described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). If one or more factors within the FEI are negatively experienced, this will stress their ability to overcome difficulty and may lead to withdrawal from the course. However, if a student has a supportive relationship with staff or effective external referral (see appendix 7) which supports their resilience, there is a chance that they may stay and achieve. If this support is not enough or timely, then they leave despite college efforts to support them. The points in the flow chart where the student's outcome can be influenced are boxes 5,11,16 and 19. Boxes 8,13 and 21 may all result in a student leaving their course. Boxes 9,14,15,18 and 22 may all lead to retention and achievement for the student. The designation of a stressor as minor or major is individual to the student and transactionally dynamic, depending upon what else is happening in the student's life at that time (Sameroff, 1991). Whether they receive support from staff or SSOs and whether that support is timely and sufficient to bolster the student's resilience, may determine whether they are retained on their HE in FE course. The flow chart could be mapped onto the individual student experiences. Below is an example of the chart in Figure 4 as applied to Julia (see figure 5). The remaining nine ex-students are also similarly mapped onto Figure 4 (page 196) in Appendix 10.

Julia starts with good personal resilience which matched her current responsibilities to look after her mother and maintain employment. She also had good motivation towards study as she seemed to have clear reasons for enrolling on the course (box 1,2, 4).

However, she encounters a major life event when her Mother's health deteriorates (box

5,6,7). This is mitigated by tutor support for her own resilience to bolster it (box 8,11). Unfortunately, her personal characteristics meant she was not able to accept any slippage in her academic performance and she experienced this as a negative institutional experience. The course did not meet her expressed needs, and this meant Northsall's ability to support Julia further with her resilience was compromised (box 11). Any further college interventions were not enough to support Julia to stay on her course through a major stressor (box 12). Ultimately this meant she dropped out of her HE in FE study (box 13). This highlights the fact that the ability to be resilient is individual and only the student, in this case Julia, could definitively say how significant each factor may be. That is why individual evaluations with students are essential as explained after figure 5, in the following section.

5.2.2 The retention 'toolkit': stage 2 and 3 the checklist and table

Stage two in using the toolkit would begin by completion of a checklist of issues identified within this research as possible causes of stress. It could be adapted from Holmes and Rahe's (1967) Social Readjustment Scale, as illustrated in Appendix 11. It may be undertaken by the student alone or in a class, or as an activity in a one-to-one meeting supported by a tutor or SSO.

Stage three in the 'toolkit' process is to transfer the issues identified by the student to a table. Three examples are included here and have also been undertaken for the remaining seven student participants in Appendix 10. The selection of these three examples represents the three main reasons why students left the course. Julia, who left due to being on the wrong course for her which illustrates the difficulties students can experience

with IAG (Figure 5 below). Gill, who left due to mental ill health (Figure 6 below) and Jake who left because of physical ill health (Figure 7 below). The tables would help to assess the personal vulnerability of students on their learning journey using Eisenburg et al.'s (2009) idea of 'stressors' versus 'enablers' to provide a guide for focused college support. This is reminiscent of Lewin's (1947) forcefield analysis approach to change management; an approach which has already been applied to the participation of adults in education by Miller (1967) but could be adapted to evaluate the positive and negative forces acting upon a HE in FE student during the course of their studies. This might empower them to both understand what resilience is and to assess what they believe to be their own current levels of resilience. A similar approach was suggested by Sarmento (2014) who created a 'mental health profile' for college students. This could include factors which affect study more generally and not just those affecting mental health.

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Ability to do the course. (Julia already had a master's degree).	+8	Caring responsibilities (Julia's Mum was ill but not acutely so at that point)	-2
Personal resilience and coping strategies to combat stress. (dropped down another workday and saw the course as helping her relax)	+4	Unforeseen increased caring responsibilities (Her Mum's health condition became unexpectedly critical)	-8
Enjoyed the course and had good relationships with tutors	+5	Personality which likes to do well.	-1
		Course didn't meet Julia's needs. (Did not need the HND, just a portfolio of artwork)	-8
	+17		-19

Figure 5: Table of Julia's resilience: enablers against stressors

It is impossible to complete the table accurately without input from the student and so this example is for illustration only. It is important that the student and tutor do this together, but in order to demonstrate the process, this table is created from a third-party point of view, based on Julia's story. Discussing and deciding the strength of the stressor or enabler may be an important part of the process and could clarify the significance of each factor for the student. For example, in figure 5, the inclusion of 'Personality which likes to do well' as a 'stressor' assumes that this is where it belongs, that a drive towards perfection could be a hindrance. However, it may also be the case that it should be located in the 'enablers' if it ensures completion of academic work. Assessments of significance between plus and minus 1-10 will be individual and negotiated between student and staff.

The following two tables have been included as additional examples, without the scoring:

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Completed a year on a HE course previously so seems prepared for the commitment involved in HE study		The workload was greater than Gill expected	
Gill asked tutors for help		Personal issues which exacerbated pre-existing mental health problems	
Gill made friends on the course who supported her		The mental health problems became acute	
		She asked tutors for help but received pastoral support rather than academic instruction and support. Some tutors were very unsupportive.	
		Gill's counselling was ineffective for her	

Figure 6: Table of Gill's resilience: enablers against stressors

Gill enrolled on a photography course in faculty A at Northsall (box 1). She had previously completed a year on a graphic design course at degree level and despite having a poor experience of tutors on that course, she felt she did know what would be expected of her at the point of enrolling (box 2,4). The workload turned out to be greater than she expected (boxes 5,6). She asked for help from tutors but felt she received pastoral support, rather than academic help (box 7,8,11,12,14). She also had some personal issues which exacerbated her mental health problems. These then became acute (boxes 16,17). She enjoyed the course itself and felt she learned a lot from the content of it. She felt that if tutors had helped more with her academic work, rather than just emotional and pastoral support she could have stayed and completed the course. She felt she was asking for help from some of the tutors but not getting it and even wrote a letter of complaint about one of them. Other tutors were more helpful, but they were not her main point of contact on the course (boxes 19,20). She had counselling but did not feel it was effective for her. She did make a small number of friends on the course despite being shy and talks about this as positive support. She says she finally left because she could not manage the workload. This seems to have been her 'final straw' (boxes 21).

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Jake attended for two years so is likely to be able to study at HE level.		Pre-existing physical health problems	
His partner is also studying at HE level so he may have greater familiarity with the requirements of degree level study.		Major exacerbation of physical health problems	
He had a positive experience of the course and the tutors			

He has good motivation from his career plans and intends to return to complete the course once his physical ill health has improved			
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Figure 7: Table of Jake's resilience: enablers against stressors

Jake was a student who enrolled on the digital journalism and media course in faculty A (box 1). He attended for two years, the full degree programme is three years and he intended to return to complete it in the future, so he has good motivation for study but also some, at that point, minor health problems. His partner is also in HE study so he is more likely to have some knowledge of HE study requirements (boxes 2,3). He felt that the tutors were very supportive and responsive to requests, but his physical health problems became just too great (boxes 5,6,7). The decision to leave was hard for him and he talks about trying to keep up and continue his studies but reaching a breaking point (box 8). He looks forward to completing his studies in the future (this would be to boxes 11,15).

Discussion of both the checklist and table would enable communication between staff and student. The research has found this to be important in supporting student resilience. The discussion, stimulated by the student's assessment, could also attempt to identify further sources of support which may be available, and which could be drawn upon to bolster their resilience. This discussion would also address the issue of noticing any student difficulty in time to support the student to stay, including referral to the SSO.

5.2.3 Further development of the retention 'toolkit'

Further development of the 'toolkit' could include an online system. The checklist could be developed to facilitate the secure, password protected storage of details of each student's resilience assessments for future reference by themselves. From the retention 'toolkit' online system, anonymised common themes of challenge can be identified more efficiently, either directly from the system or through escalation from tutors or SSOs.

The SSO role could include being a 'broker' between different parts of the college system, such as IT, libraries or counselling. They could be a 'mediator' between tutors and students experiencing difficulty. This may, for example, have helped Leah to stay and achieve her qualification, if her IT issues had been identified in this way and resolved.

The anonymised and generalised data collected from the 'toolkit' outcomes should be reported to FE college managers and then referred appropriately to designated managers who will facilitate resolutions to improve the student's experiences. This would enable managers to make better informed decisions about the deployment of funding, based directly on the student's own identified needs. It is also possible that increased completion could lead to increases in funding for the GFE.

The ability to improve resilience for an individual student is going to vary (Robertson, 2012). The influence of individual agency is important because a student may already have foreclosed their decision to leave before informing the FEI. However, the 'toolkit' is likely to help more individuals than just students who are vulnerable and assist in preventing the causes of short-term absence which can lead to complete disengagement (Porter, 2008).

Using a 'toolkit' would, de facto, lead to increased retention, benefiting all students, by increasing staff, institutional and student understanding about resilience and what might help students to stay.

5.2.4 Improved information, advice and guidance

As the students identified, better IAG would have made a difference. We need better guidance for HE in FE students. This suggests that both partial and impartial advice would support the optimum approach to student careers advice and transition and is in line with the Quality Advice Standards (QAS, 2020). IAG for progressing level 3 students could include input from a previous tutor who can support them into HE study (McGivney, 1996). Offering more widespread transition programmes, perhaps during the summer or at induction, would help prepare students who might struggle to fit into a HE environment (Lloyd and Griffiths, 2008). This programme could include further, structured individual sessions, based around the 'toolkit' to identify and allay any fears and support their resilience through a longer transition period.

5.2.5 Better underpinning for staff and student relationships

A second impact on professional practice relates to staff student relationships. The students in this study needed an individual relationship with a tutor as a key protective factor. The tutor, or other supporting member of staff, can then report and address student difficulty at an early stage. (Robertson, 2012). Ideally, this would be the student's personal tutor who will understand the importance of both pastoral and academic support through in-house training and a regular tutorial system. The research has highlighted that this could be someone else involved in student support, such as an SSO, who is available to

try and build a relationship with the student. This then becomes, a protective factor when students face additional difficulties on the course, either in their own life or within college, and should be prioritised for protection from cuts to funding (Rovai, 2002; Park et al., 2011).

5.2.6 A Student Services Officer role

Part of a student's learning agreement with an FEI is that they will be offered some health and wellbeing support as part of their contract (UCAS, 2018). This is not a new idea (Moxley et al., 2001). The HE in FE Student Services Officer role developed at Northsall from student support services has increased in emphasis as part of HE and FE wider provision for students since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act reforms (Dhillon et al., 2008). The SSO role I have described is a generic role found in a number of FE institutions. Such roles originate from the education commitment to widen participation, such as through *Action on Access*. This programme identified a similar role as '*student success advisors*' (Thomas et al., 2017: 11). This focussed student support is gaining greater recognition but needs to be more coherently co-ordinated and systematically embedded in all programmes where there are students from widening participation contexts, to ensure they have maximum impact on student retention.

The SSOs in this study, had differing job descriptions and roles within their colleges. What they had in common is a responsibility for student retention and achievement:

I think that the role [SSO] is quite well established... It's giving advice and setting up plans...I'm in the middle with the students' sort of ping-pong around. (SSO Sally).

SSO June's role is primarily for academic support but by her own admission this is beginning to extend to pastoral. For example:

I have had one student speak with me quite recently about whether she should stay or whether she should go. My role is not about that, but I suspect that if students build that relationship with me that I might be the one, because I'm visible. Whereas the tutors, very helpful but with their teaching loads, they are in the classroom, whereas I'm not. But formally, that isn't my role, to intervene when someone is at risk. (SSO June)

SSO Mike had the only role where student support was added on to his middle management position. The functions of an SSO, to support students either academically or pastorally already exist:

I'm responsible for the quality of teaching and learning and assessment...The tutors only tend to involve me when there's a particular problem and they have got to the end of their list of ideas (SSO Mike)

SSO Sally has the most comprehensive approach to both aspects of supporting vulnerable students. Sally has conducted impact assessments and her role seems to improve attendance, as well as supporting students to stay who otherwise would have left. This is especially applicable to the WP cohort at Northsall where retention can be challenging (Harter and Szurminski, 2001). SSO June's role started as academic but is becoming pastoral. Demonstrating the importance of emotional support as part of her role. Colleges with smaller HE in FE provision may, like SSO Mike, see the role as part of a wider job description.

SSOs should be part of wider college support, acting as a 'safety net' for students whose own tutors are not available to them (Kahu, 2013; Smith, 2015). They are not necessarily committed to a particular course or discipline and can maintain a degree of impartiality

and objectivity about any arising stressors. Although it would be preferable for tutors to support students, making the SSO role unnecessary, this research suggests the need for a safety net beyond course teams. In the current climate of funding constraints and efficiency savings to course hours and tutor time, this is important as suggested by Tutors Dee and Stella:

The way we support [students] is in terms of tutorials but it is quite difficult you know because it's having the time. (Tutor Stella)

It's very time consuming [supporting students]. It can be very draining, and it's taken a lot of resources off me. (Tutor Dee)

Employing substitutes, such as SSOs for that relationship when tutors simply do not have the time to be available to students seems a pragmatic compromise (Smith, 2015; Gill, 2016). A more clearly defined SSO role, would assist individual students as well as institutions with their retention. This would be enhanced by training and a professional qualification framework for the Student Services Officer role.

5.2.7 Using a trusted intermediary to facilitate access to hard-to-reach participants

This research was possible because I was able to use a trusted intermediary to access hard-to-reach participants who had already left. This might be a worthwhile method for other researchers. It presupposes that the researcher is conducting either insider research or has had significant experience of the institution(s) involved, although building a trust relationship over time by spending time at an institution may also be possible.

5.3 Final conclusion

When a Higher Education in Further Education student appears to have a difficulty, they are susceptible to a conscious or unconscious tension between resilience and challenge. The sum of all the resilience the student has accrued both before and during their studies can outweigh the factors which they newly encounter, in which case they may well stay the course. However, if the stressors outweigh the ‘resilience capital’ that the student currently has, they can drop out (Eisenburg et al., 2009; Poole, 2019). The metaphor ‘the straw which breaks the camel’s back’ is relevant here as there is often a specific point at which the struggling student feels overwhelmed and makes the decision to leave (Douglas et al., 2015).

Suggestions for changes to practice assume that there are already mechanisms for support within FEIs, which simply need enhancing or focussing. For example, group and individual tutorials are usually already resourced and taking place, highlighted by Gill:

I’m going to miss [tutor name] and [tutor name] cos they were really good tutors and I thought I’m probably not going to see them again. (Gill)

Many Higher Education in Further Education staff already have good relationships with students, and they have some of their own strategies for supporting students and their resilience effectively, Tutor Dee is a good example of this:

I think it’s [her relationship with students] central to them staying. ...in my class, I’m involved with everybody and everything and they have all stayed (Tutor Dee)

It is suggested that this good practice should be emphasised, and the pastoral support provided to students as part of a tutor’s role formalised. Good pastoral support practice

enhances student resilience. Professional development of staff could include understanding more about resilience and the 'toolkit' described here to assess Eisenburg et al.'s (2009) stressors along with a check list of possible factors in student drop out. These actions would support the resilience of all students to stay on HE in FE courses (see Appendix 11). The 'toolkit' could also reinforce the efforts of pastorally proactive tutors by providing a rationale for what they are trying to achieve, and a suggested means of achieving it, developing a better understanding of how to support HE in FE students before they reach the point of deciding to leave their degree course. This will improve the support and success of WP cohorts in HE. This is especially Important in a target-driven culture and has the potential to improve overall retention data in FE Institutions (Smith, 2015).

Resilience is a multifaceted and contested concept which is helpful in understanding the ways in which difficulties in different domains of life can combine to become overwhelming for an individual (Bergmann et al. 2019). However, it is also open to misuse and requires caution in its application (Canavan, 2007; Garrett, 2015). It is a term used by staff or management, rather than students. Sharing its meaning with students could be helpful in empowering them to reflect upon and improve their ability to achieve their HE in FE qualification. However, this has to be counterbalanced by an understanding of **how** the concept of resilience has sometimes been used to shift blame for student drop out to the individual (Canavan, 2007; Garrett, 2015). Any strategy to increase the resilience of students should not be used by Government or policy makers as a justification to lower resourcing for support. Enhancing resilience for individuals is not a substitute for providing strong support systems for all students within the education system (Reay et al., 2001b; LeGrand et al., 2008).

FEIs have a good track record in supporting WP students but need adequate financial support to ensure students can access their services (BIS, 2014; AoC, in Evans, 2015). Facilitating student understanding of resilience and implementing strategies to support students has the potential to mitigate against attrition. It can achieve this by tipping the balance a little more towards enabling FE in HE students as consumers, who may be the least well equipped and informed players in the neoliberal educational quasi- market (LeGrand, 2008).

Recognising the centrality of student relationships with tutors and the importance of other staff, such as SSOs to offer a safety net could be seen as potentially running counter to the idea of education as a business, albeit within a quasi-market. There are other factors which have been identified by this research as enhancing tutor relationships with students. These include effective and impartial IAG; identified individuals in an SSO role to mediate access to wider college services; and deliberately fostering positive student to student relationships. All these can contribute to building resilience 'capital' (Poole, 2019). In the end, in supporting resilience and retention it is the *outcome* of tutor actions and not the intent that matters. Effective pastoral relationships between staff and students can lead to increases in student completion rates and meet the needs of education and employer requirements.

It is important to recognise the difference between what students as individuals can reasonably expect to change and what Governments and FEIs need to take responsibility for, in ensuring widening participation students have equitable access to Higher Education. The concept of resilience can place the 'problem' of HE in FE student retention as located

with the individual and indicative of a personal deficit (Garrett, 2015; Smith, 2015). The quasi-market environment for further and higher education could be resolved by recognising a more collectivist, non-competitive approach (Le Grand et al., 2008). Colleges must also recognise that their marketised approaches must meet promoted expectations to establish trust and confidence in the HE in FE system. This could widen participation by ensuring all players within the system can be adequately funded to support students to the best of their ability and to encourage a more equitable approach to Higher Education. The difficulty facing, HE in FE students, may not be their lack of discernment as consumers but their disadvantaged position within society and lack of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay et al., 2001a).

5.3.1 Further research

Further research is needed to assess the generalisability of the factors identified within this research and the efficacy of its suggestions for practice. The toolkit and associated professional development for staff could be used as a foundation to support improved practice and retention for HE students in FEIs could be developed and evaluated. This research could be used as a basis to facilitate future educational practice in the pastoral support of HE in FE students by examining further the most effective way to make interventions which will bolster personal student resilience through discussion and awareness, and lead to fewer students dropping out of their degree level courses. Possible future research questions could be:

1. What are the key questions which could be asked of HE in FE students in initial pastoral tutorials in order to identify individual challenges?
2. How far do HE in FE students feel FEIs marketed expectations are realised?

3. What timely and effective college systems and interventions should be made which support HE in FE students to complete their courses when they are facing institutional or personal stressors?
4. What is the nature of Student Services Officer roles across the HE in FE sector and how could the role be defined, promoted and supported with further professional development?
5. How could the role of Student Services Officer be shown to be cost effective?

Supporting achievement for HE in FE students is both a national and individual concern as the FE sector makes a significant contribution both to the general upskilling of the population but also enriches the individual lives of many WP students and their families.

5.3.2 Impact on the researcher and plans for development

The process of conducting primary research within one's own employment is both gratifying and challenging. The challenge is to be as objective as is possible without losing the advantage of understanding the environment in which you are researching and your status as an insider (Le Gallais, 2008). It has been a humbling and reflexive experience to understand the perspectives of all the participants. Gaining the support and trust of an SSO as an intermediary to reach this student population was a breakthrough moment.

Students, who leave, also leave a gap in understanding which it is difficult to fill without hearing their stories. Attempts to contact them in the past met with very limited success; being able to gain insight into their experiences has informed my own role in HE in FE.

My future plans are focussed on developing and testing the retention 'toolkit' to see if it can support; - HE in FE colleagues with assessing student resilience and ensuring more

timely intervention for those students who need it. I have links with another local FEI with a large HE in FE provision and I have retained links with the FEIs in which the SSOs were employed. I am hoping that some or all of them will agree to pilot the retention 'toolkit' as this could lead to evaluation and further development of it, although these plans have been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, I will share this research in some form as it is valuable in highlighting the voice of students who are a so-called, 'hard to reach' population. My interviews tell me just what a loss leaving their courses is for the former students as well as the follow-on impact on their families, their contributions to HE, to their employers and the economy.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Anonymised summary of recent Northsall retention and achievement data

It shows the overall levels of retention and achievement within Northsall immediately preceding and at the time of the research.

College Data – Background to the Research

Retention

(Taken from Northsall's latest Self-assessment report 2013/14)

Level 3

Cross College three-year FE trend 2011/12 to 2013/14

All durations:

	Starts	Retention	Achievement	Success
2011/12	1814	93	91	85
2012/13	1677	93	88	83
2013/14	1037	90	94	84

Long programmes only:

	Starts	Retention	Achievement	Success
2011/12	1179	91	90	81
2012/13	1256	92	86	80
2013/14	794	89	93	83

Retention Targets

(From Northsall's balanced scorecard for 2013-14)

Improve HEFCE Retention Rates from 80 per cent to 83 per cent.

Improve HEFCE Achievement rates from 95 per cent to 95 per cent.

Classroom Based Learning

(From Northsall's Self-Assessment Report 2014)

Main summary of Classroom Based Learning data

Long Cour ses	13/14 results (from Pro-Achieve)				2012/13 National Averages (QSR)	
	Age Grou p	Retained per cent	Achieved per cent	Success per cent	Retained per cent	Achieved per cent
Level 3	16-18	90.2per cent	90.4per cent	81.6per cent	90.2per cent	91.3per cent
	19+	90.6per cent	93.8per cent	85.0per cent	86.5per cent	91.9per cent

Higher Education

Higher Education	Code	HCG (as at 19/10/15) 2014/15				Outturn 13/14		
		New Starts	Continuers	Ret per cent (Best Case)	Achievement	New Starts	Retained	Achieved
Faculty A	D21	247		76	99.0	419	76.0	99.0
Faculty B	F20	472		75	99.0	420	80.0	100.0
HE Overall		719		76	99.0	839	78.0	99.5

Appendix 2: Widening Participation (WP) data returned by Northsall.

This was produced for the Skills Funding Agency and the Young People's Learning Agency from 2013-2016

Diversity: Participation

Analysis of the whole college's data (From MIS 28/1/16) on Additional learning support suggests that over time, less learners within college have declared an additional support need. From 27% in 13/14 to 19% in 2015/16. This contrasted with a declared learning disability which rose from 26% to 36% in the same period. However, these statistics rely on information received by learners at enrolment and the guidance they receive from the tutor at that point can significantly impact on these rates.

In terms of ethnicity, the locality has been traditionally low in numbers of non-white residents. However, immigration has increased in recent years. Data from college suggests that in 2013/14 non-white students across college were 16% of the overall student population. Whereas in 2015/16 they had risen to 20%

The gender mix in college suggests that over the same period (2013/14 to 2015/16) numbers of females increased slightly, from 46% to 52% but remain at a split which is roughly equal. However, I know that this is not reflected within subject areas, where females still dominate their traditional occupational learning routes, such as hairdressing, childcare and health and social care and males are the overwhelming majority in areas such as construction and engineering.

Diversity: Achievement and Success

From MIS Data (May 2015) The 19+ age group are more likely to achieve than younger students within the HE faculty of Business and Science. Those with declared disabilities has steadily risen within the faculty from 2011/12 to 2013/14 and their success has similarly increased, from 52% to 97% of those with disabilities succeeding. This is now roughly on par with the overall success rates within the faculty for all learners and way above college averages of 78%

In terms of ethnicity, from a low of 67% in 2011/12, success rose through 2012/13 and 2013/14 to 88% and is now above college wide success rates of 77%

Data relating to gender suggests that females have always achieved strongly within the HE faculty with success rates of 100% and 83% more recently over the last three years, against a college average of 76%. Males have improved in the same period from 74% to 78% in 13/14 which is above the college average of 75%.

Overall, Higher education within the college holds up well against college averages. It has also, generally increased success, achievement and retention rates in most areas of diversity. This is despite three-year durations having the potential to have much poorer retention than the one-year durations in FE. Perhaps HE learners are more motivated or perhaps they receive better support.

Appendix 3: The ethical procedure submitted to the Open University ethics committee for ethical approval.

Procedure:

For the ex-student participants: once a potential participant, who meets the criteria for the study, has self-identified, via responding to an email or survey monkey invitation, I will approach the student to arrange a time. I will explain the research and its purpose, as well as offering them the information sheet if they are initially interested (see appendix 4).

(Further details under 'consent' below)

Following poor response, I offered to conduct the interview with the ex-student by telephone. This necessitated installing software on my phone to record it for transcription. This was fully explained to the participant by email and I also said it verbally again at the start of the interview. This was also done with all interviews conducted face to face and video recorded. I thought it was important to reiterate the fact that the information was recorded at the start of any and all interviews.

The questionnaires had information about the study included in the invitation and obviously any participant unhappy with the questions did not need to continue to the end of the questionnaire, meaning their responses would not be saved by the survey monkey software and not available to me. My contact details were included on the survey monkey questionnaire both to facilitate any further questions, allow for opting out by contacting me directly or I also offered the opportunity for a full, face to face or phone call version of the questionnaire as a semi structured interview in case any respondent would prefer that or wished to say more than they had been allowed to type.

Any participant can request to have any data they have supplied destroyed, provided they do so within six months of it being collected to allow for an alternative participant to be found. The interviews will be recorded for later transcription and analysis. This is explained in the participant information sheet (see appendix 4). Data (that is, video or audio tapes, observation schedules, field notes and transcriptions) will be stored securely in paper or

electronic form for six months after that I will destroy any raw data once my research is completed and submitted after 2019.

Storage of the data collected will be on my own personal home computer only. It is password secured and within a locked residence. I have the facility to back up data on a secure external disk – also password protected which will remain at the same place.

- Permission to use limited information on retention from college systems in an anonymised form and possibly for external publication has been sought from senior and middle managers at the college.
- Consent has now been sought and approved by chair's action from the college's own ethics committee. – Copies of documentation to support this are available on request
- Students as participants, establishing a suitable protocol to do this for the purposes of the study, including a permission form and explanation of the right to withdraw and their data removed from the study at any time.

Participants' Consent.

In all cases the participant, whether staff or student will be approached, and the purpose of the research fully explained. A participant information sheet and consent form will be issued if the participant agrees in principal after the initial approach. An initial cooling off period of a week will be given, then a second approach which will involve the return of the consent form and an opportunity for any further questions regarding either the research or the process of the interview. A date, time and venue will then be arranged. The right to withdraw will be reinforced at each stage, including at the point of interview.

Arrangements for withdrawing the use of their data following the interview if they wish to withdraw after the interview will also be fully explained at the interview. (See appendix 4

for participant information forms) Ensuring the security, storage and confidentiality of all research data and information both prior to and after anonymization as appropriate.

Data Protection and Data Security

Having looked at the privacy law compliance checking documentation, as I intend to collect the data in an anonymised form as identification of individuals in the future will not be necessary (for follow up interviews, etc.) I do not believe that I need to register with the data project coordinator at the Open University.

Anonymising the college has proved a particular challenge as well as ensuring it is not named in the text, the referencing of reports cited will also be anonymised to avoid it's identification.

This is the checklist required by the OU ethics committee in order to secure ethical approval for the research. Any 'yes' responses mean that a larger form with greater detail will also need to be completed. This form is included below.

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)

Project Registration and Risk Checklist

If you are planning a research project that involves human participants (data and/or biological samples), you should complete and submit this checklist so that the HREC Chair can decide the level of ethics review that is required. If you have not already done so, refer to the **OU Ethics Principles for Research involving Human Participants.**

Once you have completed the checklist, save it for your records and email a copy to Research-Rec-Review@open.ac.uk, with any relevant documents e.g., a questionnaire, consent form, publicity leaflet and/or a draft bid. You will then be contacted as to whether or not your research will need full HREC review (please indicate if you require an urgent decision). No potential participants should be approached to take part in any research until you have submitted your checklist and, where required, obtained a HREC review.

Section I: Project Details

Project title	What is the nature of transitions between level 3 and level 4 in a general further education college?
Brief description (100 words maximum)	The primary research will involve a small number of semi structured interviews to staff and students who study or teach on level 4 programmes within a HE in FE institution. Over the course of two years. The questions will relate to their experiences of study at level 3 and 4, focussing on concepts such as resilience, self-regulation and pedagogy through asking about their study habits, experiences and relationships with teaching staff as well as the support for study offered by the college.
Is your research part of an application for external funding?	No
If so, please provide the name of the funding body and your <u>Awards Management System</u> (AMS) reference	Funding body: N/A AMS ref:
Will your research proceed if external funding is not awarded?	Yes
Is your research being assessed by the <u>Student Research Project Panel</u> ?	

Section IV: Risk Checklist

Please assess your research using the following questions and click yes or no as appropriate. If there is any possibility of significant risk, please tick yes. Even if your list contains all “no’s you should still return your completed checklist so the Chair can assess the proposed research.

		Yes	No
1	Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent? (e.g., children, people with learning disabilities)		✓
2	Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? (e.g., students at school, members of a self-help group, residents of nursing home)	✓	
3	Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (e.g., covert observation of people in non-public places)		✓
4	Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g., sexual activity, drug use)?		✓
5	Are drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g., food substances, vitamins) to be administered to the study participants or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedure of any kinds?		✓
6	Is pain or more than mild discomfort likely to result from the study?		✓
7	Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?		✓
8	Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing?		✓
9	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		✓
10	Will the study involve recruitment of patients or staff through the NHS or the use of NHS data?		✓

11	Will the study involve the collection of human tissue or other human biological samples?		✓
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If you answered ‘yes’ to questions **10** or **11**, you will also have to submit an application to an appropriate [National Research Ethics Service](#) ethics committee).

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University’s ***Code Of Practice for Research*** and the ***Ethics Principles for Research involving Human Participants***, and any relevant academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study. Also, to provide appropriate participant information sheets and [consent forms](#), and ensuring secure storage and use of data. FAQs offering advice and guidance on these issues are available on the [Research Ethics website](#).

This is the main form completed to explain the research to the OU ethics committee. It was completed before the pilot study.

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HREC) PROFORMA – EDITED VERSION

Project identification and rationale

Title of project

What is the nature of transitions between level 3 and level 4 in a general further education college?

Abstract

The primary research will involve a small number of semi structured interviews to staff and students who study or teach on level 4 and 5 programmes within a HE in FE institution. At the beginning of the academic year 2015-16 and 2016-17, two different cohorts of students and staff will be questioned. The cohorts will be small, one member of staff and two students in the first year for the pilot study and around double in the second year for the main study. The questions will relate to their experiences of study at level 3 and 4, focussing on concepts such as resilience, self-regulation and pedagogy through asking about their study habits, experiences and relationships with teaching staff as well as the support for study offered by the college. Therefore, I do not anticipate any sensitive or difficult questions.

Project personnel and collaborators

Investigators

Principal Investigator/
(or Research Student):

Elspeth Nelson

Other researcher(s):

N/A

Primary Supervisor (if applicable):

Dr. Angela Srivastava

Research protocol

Methodology

Part one of the pilot study will be semi structured interviews conducted prior to the commencement of their HE level of study. All interviews will be completed prior to starting their course, so avoiding influencing either each other or themselves with pre-conceptions (Assiter and Gibbs, 2007). Less structured interviews as Hammersley (2007) asserts, can provide information not available in any other way because you can locate behaviour verbally to link to specific situations and get enough information to attempt to understand the perspectives of those taking part in their research. To improve validity, every effort will be made to provide a naturalistic situation for the interviews. I will also be interviewing about retrospective experiences of study to date; therefore, it should reflect what they have actually done (Gomm et al. 2000). Interviews will focus on the research questions, looking at their views and perceptions of study at level 4 and how well prepared they feel following their experiences at level 3.

There will be a further cohort of existing level 4 students, prior to commencing their level 5 study. This will be to test out their experiences of study and how well they feel they were prepared by their level 3 study, how different their experiences are at level 4 compared to level 5, relating their answers to concepts of resilience, self-regulation and relationships with tutors as factors in successful study and completion of their programmes.

For the main study, an expanded cohort will be selected, using the same profile of level three students entering HE study at level four. However, the sample, will be larger and should therefore give a more representative picture across the HE provision. Therefore, it may highlight similarities or differences in different subject areas. If this happens, it may be to do with the different pedagogy employed by different course teams, and this will need to be taken into account. The sample (details in the timeline) will consist of: Two gatekeepers – a curriculum leader and associate Dean or head of teaching and learning.

(Participant – see below)

As in the pilot, there will be a further cohort of existing level 4 students, prior to commencing their level 5 study. This will be to test out their experiences of study and how well they feel they were prepared by their level 3 study, how different their experiences are at level 4 compared to level 5, relating their answers to concepts of resilience, self-regulation and relationships with tutors as factors in successful study and completion of their programmes.

I will obtain my participants through the gatekeeper of their course leader. Once a potential participant, who meets the criteria for the study, has been identified and agreed between us. I will approach the student at an arranged time, likely in their induction or first tutorial session. I will explain the research and its purpose, as well as offering them the information sheet if they are initially interested. (Further details under 'consent' below)

Any participant can request to have any data they have supplied destroyed, provided they do so within six months of it being collected to allow for an alternative participant to be found. The interviews will be recorded for later transcription and analysis. This is explained in the participant information sheet. Data (video or audio tapes, observation schedules, field notes) will be stored securely in paper or electronic form for six months after that I will destroy any raw data once my research is completed and submitted after 2018

Storage of the data collected will be on my own personal home computer only. It is password secured and within a locked residence. I have the facility to back up data on a secure external disk – also password protected which will remain at the same place.

Participants

The courses selected for participation had the relevant features of being a full-time programme of study, attracting students who were both internally progressing and externally applying. They also were not courses I teach on, to try and avoid some of the issues of insider accounts and possible bias or ethical considerations regarding being in the position of assessing students I am also interviewing.

The sample for the pilot study

Level 3 to 4 consisting of 1 student from 1 course
Level 4 to 5 consisting of 1 student from 1 course
One gatekeeper – a curriculum leader from the faculty

The sample for the main study

Level 3 to 4, consisting of 2 students from 2 different courses
Level 4 to 5 consisting of 2 students from 2 different courses
Two gatekeepers – a curriculum leader and associate Dean or head of teaching and learning

The staff members who will be interviewed are selected from the wider faculty management team which consists of the Dean, associate Dean, head of teaching and learning, myself as Quality manager and three curriculum leaders. One of the curriculum leaders is responsible for level 3 and so would not have the most appropriate experience to talk about level 4 and beyond. Similarly, the Dean does not teach nor is directly involved in course management and therefore is also less likely to have recent experience of student support and teaching to draw upon.

Recruitment procedures

The sampling of the first participant from level 3-4 will be done by identifying all those within the cohorts of the selected programmes who have progressed internally from other level 3 programmes within the college and selecting a participant at random from the subgroup identified.

The second participant will be identified from 3-4 by creating a list of those externally applying to the college and selecting one from this subgroup at random.

The process will be repeated for the second two participants from level 4-5.

The curriculum leader selected for the pilot study is randomly chosen, the other is likely to form the sample for the main study. Between the dean and head of teaching and learning there will be a random selection.

Consent

In all cases the participant, whether staff or student will be approached, and the purpose of the research fully explained. A participant information sheet and consent form will be issued if the participant agrees in principle after the initial approach. An initial cooling off period of a week will be given, then a second approach which will involve the return of the consent form and an opportunity for any further questions regarding either the research or the process of the interview. A date, time and venue will then be arranged. The right to withdraw will be reinforced at each stage, including at the point of interview. Arrangements for withdrawing the use of their data following the interview if they wish to withdraw after the interview will also be fully explained at the interview.

- Participant's information sheets and consent forms are provided with this form.

Locations of data Collection

The interviews will take place in tutorial rooms within the faculty of business and science at (Details removed). Permission for this will be provided by the Dean of Faculty. Registry are also aware of my research and supportive of it as I have already been asked to summarise it at the recent higher education conference.

Consent has now been sought and approved by chair's action from the college's own ethics committee. – copies of documentation to support this are available on request. This location is chosen because it is convenient to both participants and the researcher. It is relatively neutral in that it is attached to their programme of study and therefore a student participant will be familiar with. For the staff participants it is their place of work and therefore they will feel relaxed and familiar with the venue. The setting is also relatively quiet (more so than a café, for example) and would lend itself to recording equipment, etc. as necessary as this could be easily stored locally and used.

Other project-related risks

Data Storage:

This will be done by myself on my own, password protected PC. It will also be anonymised at the point of collection so there is no possibility of participants being identified at any stage in the compilation and analysis of data.

Insurance

There is no particular extraordinary risk which would not be covered by either Open University or my own institutional insurance since it will be carried out in the course of my working duties and relates to discussions which may well have been had with students as part of the tutorial process. My questions are just more focused towards my research.

Benefits and knowledge transfer

Participants would have the opportunity to develop their personal reflection on their learning which would feed into the personal and professional development units on their programme which encourage and require this as part of their learning outcomes.

There will also be the opportunity to use the results to inform CPD within the college and across its four sites.

Both to support students to progress and achieve, but also to meet the Government agenda (National Audit office, 2002, HEFCE, 2003, DfES, 2006) (National strategy for access and student success, 2014). There would also be potential funding gains for the institution from improved retention and achievement.

The college has a history of the development of its higher education provision which broadly matches changing Government policy since 1997, and as such could potentially be generalised to other, HE in FE institutions (Bassey, 2001).

Declaration

I declare that the research will conform to the above protocol and that any significant changes or new ethics issues will be raised with the HREC before they are implemented.

I declare that I have read and will adhere to the following two OU documents:

- [OU Code Of Practice For Research and at the Open University](#)
- [OU Ethics Principles for Research involving Human Participants](#)

<http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/index.shtml>)

In order to conform to OU governance guidelines, brief information on OU research approved by the HREC will be added to the [Research Ethics website](#). The HREC will assume that you agree that the following data from your research can be made public via the website unless you tick the box below:

HREC reference number	Project title	Faculty	Approval date	Type of HREC approval

☐ No, I do not wish for details of my HREC approved research to be publicised.

Name:

Elspeth Nelson

Unit/Faculty:

Education

(Contact details blanked)

Telephone

(Contact details blanked)

E-mail

Signature(s)

Elspeth Nelson

(this can be the typed name(s) of
investigator(s) if an electronic copy
is submitted (which is preferred)

24- 8-15

Date:

End of project final report

Once your research has been completed you will need to complete and submit a final report to the HREC. A copy of the template can be found on the Research Ethics website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research/human-research-ethics-full-review-process-and-proforma#final-report>.

October 2018

Proposed date for final report:

Appendix 4: The participant information sheet and consent form

(This was summarised to participants at the start of their telephone interview)

Date: Sept. 2016 (or date of interview)

I am currently studying for my Doctorate in education qualification through the Open University. My research is looking at level 3 to 4 progression (from A level to first year degree level) and trying to understand why some students stay on the course and achieve their degree, whereas, for a variety of reasons, some students leave. I am also interested in whether their experiences in college, before and during their course, have any effect on whether they decide to stay and complete their studies or if there are other reasons for changing their minds about degree study.

Study title

Why Do students drop out of Higher education in a Further Education college?

Invitation paragraph

I would very much like you to be part of this study but understand that you need to know as much information as possible before you make your decision. Participation is entirely optional. To help you make your decision I have written out the following information about my research in the format of 'frequently asked questions' and I would be grateful if you could take the time to read them and if you feel you can take part, complete the permission form you have also received.

What is the purpose of the study and what will happen?

Participating will involve no more than an hour of your time. We will arrange a mutually convenient time and place to fit around your work/study. The Interview can be conducted either in person or over the phone.

The research will involve a small number of semi structured interviews (some questions but also some discussion) I will be interviewing staff and students who study or teach on level 4 programmes within the college currently, In addition, I aim to interview ex-students who began courses but subsequently left for a variety of reasons. The questions will relate to their experiences of study at level 4, regarding teaching, learning and expectations as well as asking about the support offered by the college. There will not be any sensitive or difficult questions. I am especially interested in those students who decided not to

continue their studies and how they reached that difficult decision. I will need participants (people taking part) and I would be very grateful if you would agree to be interviewed.

Why have I been invited to participate?

I would like you to take part because I am looking for participants who have either joined a level 4 course and are currently continuing their studies, or who have joined a course but decided to leave before the end. I want to talk to staff who are directly involved with teaching and managing the learning of level 4 students.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in the research is entirely voluntary and participants can opt out at any time. It is up to you to decide whether or not to agree to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Choosing to either take part or not take part in the study will have no impact on your assessments or future studies.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to give up to an hour of your time. I understand that this would-be time which could be used for other activities.

How will the information I provide in this study be managed?

To comply with the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts, all information collected about you as an individual will be anonymised, and personal data will be treated as confidential. It will only be available to you, me and my tutor(s). You can request to have any data you supply destroyed, provided they do so within six months of it being collected to allow for an alternative participant to be found. Data (video or audio tapes, observation schedules, field notes) will be stored securely in paper or electronic form for six months and that I will destroy any raw data once my research is completed. Anonymised versions of the data will appear in the final version of my thesis.

What should I do if I want to take part and agree to give my consent?

This will involve signing the consent form and returning it to me.

Can I withdraw once the study is underway?

You can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and there will be no adverse consequences if you decide to do so. However, in the interests of completing my research, I would ask that you do it within 6 months of the interview so that a suitable alternative participant can be found.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

I will write up the results of the study in a research report and it will be submitted to my supervisor and the Open University for assessment. I will provide you with a copy of your research report if you would like to see it. There is also a possibility that the results may be published, however any data included will be fully anonymised.

Ethics Guidelines

The research will be carried out in accordance with the ethics guidelines of The British Educational Research Association.

Contact for Further Information

Elspeth Nelson,

(Contact details blanked)

Contact me directly for further information if necessary. If you want to talk to someone else about your study, you should contact;

Dr. Alan Floyd (EdD Programme Leader)

The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA

Thank you for taking time to read the information sheet.

Participant Consent Form (from the Pilot study, in the main study consent was recorded at the start of the telephone interview)

For all students and staff taking part in interviews.

Title of project:

What is the nature of transitions between level 3 and level 4 in a general further education college?

Name and address of researcher: Elspeth Nelson, (Contact details blanked)

(Please tick the box)

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions
☐
 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason
☐
 3. I agree to take part in the above study ☐
 4. I agree to being audio recorded ☐
 5. I agree to being video recorded (if necessary)
☐
 6. I agree that my data gathered in this study (after it has been anonymised) may be stored securely in paper or electronic form and published for the purposes of educational research ☐
- Please Note: If, from information you reveal within the interview, you are at serious risk of harming yourself or others; or there are concerns for the neglect or abuse of children then we will have to share your information with agencies, this may be without your permission. If this happens, I will discuss it with you first.

Name of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature _____

Researcher: Elspeth Nelson Date _____

Appendix 5: The interview questions

Student prompt questions

The title of the research is: Why Do students drop out of Higher education in a Further Education college?

Questions

This research is into degree equivalent level study. I am interested in all aspects of how your study fitted into your life plan. This includes how you came to your decision to enrol on the course, your experiences on the course, but probably most importantly, how leaving the course fitted into your life experiences and goals overall.

The questions are simply to get you thinking so answer as many or as few as you feel you can.

1. What was the course you enrolled on at the college?
2. How long were you attending classes for?
3. Where their people in your life who had previously done a degree course who could offered help and advice?

If so, how useful was the advice? If not, do you think it would have helped if you had had someone like that?

4. How well did the delivery of the course meet your needs?
How well did the structure, days of the week, etc. fit into your life?
Did you think the subjects covered were relevant?

5. Did the course prepare you for what you needed to do to complete it? For example, with study skills or advice about how to be successful on the course?

Was the course content what you expected it to be?

Did you feel supported to study?

6. How did you get on with other students? Did you make friends?

Were their support networks such as Facebook?

Did your tutor encourage you to work with other students, either in class or in your own time?

7. How do you look back on your experiences on the course? Do you feel positively or negatively about the time you spent studying?
8. Tell me about the tutors on the course and how you related to them.
9. At the point in time where you realised you were having difficulties with your course, please describe what happened.
What were those difficulties?
Why do you think you had them?
Who did you tell, and did they help?
10. What kinds of things were you taking into consideration when you made your decision to leave the course?

Staff prompt questions

1. What is your role in supporting students to be successful in their HE in FE studies?
2. Describe the best ways to support level 3 students to successfully become Higher Education students?
3. Describe the main attributes of a successful and high achieving degree student?
4. How well do courses at level 3 within the college help to develop the necessary skills for a student to be successful at level 4?
5. Thinking about a student who begins their degree course but struggles with the demands of the course. Do these students share the same kinds of problems with their studies?
6. What kinds of problems do you think, from your experience, students encounter when starting their higher education studies?
7. Given unlimited resources, what would you do to support students in their transition between level 3 and degree level in college?
8. How important do you think, is the relationship between student and tutor to the success of a student on a HE in FE programme?
9. Do you think there are differences between students who have progressed through the college to study at Higher Education level, and those who have either gained their entry requirements elsewhere, or taken time out from their studies between level 3 and their degree?
10. What makes a good tutor?

Student Services Officer prompt questions

1. Please can you tell me your current job title?
2. What is the official description of your role?
3. What would you say your role actually is? If it differs from the official description.
4. Roughly what percentage of students who leave HE programmes each year do you think you are involved with in some way?
5. What is the main way in which you get involved – are they referred or are you proactive in seeking out vulnerable students?
6. What are the main indicators, to you, that a student may be at risk of leaving?
7. Can you describe a successful working relationship between you and a tutor which could lead to a student staying who would otherwise leave?
8. Could you describe a typical unsuccessful relationship between yourself and a tutor?
9. Where do you fit within the structure of the college?
10. What kinds of agencies do you use to refer students on to, both inside and outside the college?
11. What do you think is the single most important change which would support students at risk of leaving to stay?
12. How important do you think your role is in supporting students who would otherwise leave their course to stay?
13. From your experience of students who have made the decision to leave, what kinds of reasons do they give?

Appendix 6: Amendment to application to human research ethics committee

This is the details of the amendment sent to the OU ethics committee following the pilot study and before the main study. The main changes were to the participant groups which were now going to include students who had left their higher education in further education study.

(Please note that the checklist data has not changed)

Rationale for Amendment

Following a first year of research in which my end of year report was not approved for the continuation of my research this year, I have made some significant changes to the focus of the research and this has affected how my primary research will be conducted such that an amendment to my ethical approval may be necessary.

The research still focuses on progression from level 3 to 4. The context is a large further education college which also offers higher education provision. The research arose from professional experience in the further and higher education sector spanning 20 years.

During that time as both a quality manager and as a tutor, I have been concerned with why some students who have obviously been successful at level 3 (A level equivalent) commit to their level 4 studies but drop out and fail to complete the course.

In my previous approval, I was concerned with staff and students who study or teach on level 4 and 5 programmes within a HE in FE institution. However, rather than focusing on those students who have stayed on their courses and achieved their qualification, I now intend to interview students who have left the course during their first year of degree study.

The commitment the student makes when enrolling on a level 4 course is wide ranging. Not just in terms of time but also; financial; in most cases, there will be potential future debt. Emotionally and psychologically they will have had to make space in their lives to study which may well have compromised or curtailed other activity such as time with family and friends or hobbies. In some cases, this commitment may also have involved others in their lives to support with childcare and household tasks. So, given the wide-ranging effects of their decision to take a further course at level 4, my research seeks to ask, 'What happens

during the level 4 year which means they cannot live up to the commitment they have made?'.

In addition, I will also interview a small number of students who are currently continuing with their studies, but for a variety of reasons seem to be struggling to live up to the commitment they made. A third group of interviewees will be a small number of relevant staff. I will start with learning support staff and also include some tutors who teach at level 4 to get a broader perspective regarding the possible reasons for students not being able to stay and achieve on their course.

Methods and Recruitment Procedure

In all cases the interviews will be semi structured, as in the original proposal. This means I will have a list of broad areas of questioning but will allow for participants to speak as freely as possible about their experiences of study or teaching at level 4 in the college. The main cohort of participants will come from students who have enrolled and attended for some time (at least a half term) on a programme of level 4 study but have subsequently left. This will mean identifying, from college systems, who these possible participants are and obtaining their contact details. Following this process, they will need to be approached. I intend to do this initially by email. Then I will follow this up with a phone call. Only potential participants who respond positively and understand what they are agreeing to will be included in the study. I will ensure this by emailing the participant information sheet to them as well as explaining either over the phone or in person the purpose of my research as well as asking them to give consent either by signing the consent form or by email agreement.

The actual interviews will be no longer than an hour, at a prearranged time and with the option of either meeting at a mutually convenient place or by phone or other media such as Skype.

In all other respects the methodology of the data collection will be the same as stated on the original ethics form. In particular with regard to recruiting and interviewing a small number of existing students and staff at the college.

Participants

I intend to undertake 3 initial interviews with two students who have left their programmes and a student who is currently continuing on the course but finding committing to their studies currently difficult. I will also interview a learning mentor who has responsibility for supporting students at risk of leaving.

Following those initial pilot interviews, I will expand the cohort of ex-students to around 12 and will also interview a small number of staff who teach at level 4.

Procedures for participant support

Should any students seem to be distressed during the course of the research. This could be either at the stage of contacting them, possibly if they have negative feelings around leaving the course. It could also be at the point of interview. I am qualified to certificate level in counselling myself so would ensure they are fit to leave, having abandoned the interview to talk through their issues.

I would also offer further support from the college as necessary. This could be an appointment with a course tutor to discuss continuing their studies or referring them to the student engagement officer or the college counsellor depending on what their concerns are.

Interview sample for the pilot study

- 2 ex-level 4 students who have left the course but have been identified and contacted from college records.
- 1 existing student who may be at risk of leaving the programme as identified by their tutor.
- 1 member of staff responsible for student support

Interview sample for the main study

- 10-12 ex-level 4 students who have left the course but have been identified and contacted from college records.
- 3- 5 existing student who may be at risk of leaving the programme as identified by their tutor.
- 3- 5 staff who teach students on level 4 programmes at Northsall.

New Schedule

Year 1 2016-17

	Participants	Data collection	Purpose	Date
Pilot Study				
Stage 1	Interview with the learning mentor, a member of staff responsible for supporting vulnerable students to be retained on their programme of study They will be identified and contacted from college records	Semi structured interviews	To explore their ideas about why some students at level 4 fail to complete their courses. This will be noted against issues suggested from the literature review but may introduce	Oct/Nov 2016
Stage 2	2 students who have left their level 4 programmes of study after attending for a minimum of ½ a	Semi structured interviews	reasons not previously considered be either myself or	Nov/Dec 2016

	term and enrolled within the last 3-5 years		other researchers.	
Stage 3	Interview an existing student who has been identified as in need of support due to attendance below 80per cent and tutor concerns reported to the student engagement officer	Semi structured interviews		Dec/Jan 2016
Main Study				
Stage 1	Interview up to 12 further ex-level 4 students who enrolled within the last five years and attended for a minimum of ½ a term. They will be identified and contacted from college records.	Semi structured interviews	To explore their ideas about why some students at level 4 fail to complete their courses. Possible lines of enquiry from the pilot study will be carried	Jan/Feb 2017
Stage 2	5 existing student who may be at risk of leaving the programme as identified by their tutor	Semi structured interviews	forward as well as again employing existing ideas	Feb/Mar 2017
Stage 3	5 staff who teach students on level 4 programmes at Northsall.	Semi structured interviews	and concepts from the literature review.	Mar/Apr 2017

This is the response to the request to amend the ethical procedure which confirms ethical approval for the research.

Dr Louise Westmarland Chair, The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee
Email Louise.westmarland@open.ac.uk Extension 52462

To Elspeth Nelson, Education

Subject What is the nature of transitions between level 3 and level 4 in a general further education college?

Ref HREC 2015 2071 Nelson AMS (Red) Submitted 24/08/2015 Date 3/10/2016.

Memorandum

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, has been given a favourable opinion by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee by Chair's action as it is thought to be low risk. This is on the condition that SRPP approval is received. Please note that the OU research ethics review procedures are fully compliant with the majority of grant awarding bodies and their Frameworks for Research Ethics.

Please make sure that any question(s) relating to your application and approval are sent to Research-RECRewiew@open.ac.uk quoting the HREC reference number above. We will endeavour to respond as quickly as possible so that your research is not delayed in any way.

At the conclusion of your project, by the date that you stated in your application, the Committee would like to receive a summary report on the progress of this project, any ethical issues that have arisen and how they have been dealt with.

Kind regards,

Dr Louise Westmarland

Chair OU HREC

Appendix 7: External places of referral by Student Services Officers (SSOs)

This list was produced to highlight the possible sources of support which one of the SSOs draws upon in order to support HE in FE students who have been identified as 'at risk' of leaving, either by self or tutor referral to the SSO for intervention in order to try and support them and prevent them dropping out of their studies.

Possible Interventions offered - in order of escalation.

Tutor – Academic Support

Tutor – Pastoral Support

Student Services Officer Support (SSO)

Referral to faculty management team

Referral to various forms of support both internal and external to Northsall

Internal (examples from SSO interviews)

Counselling

Student services for financial or childcare support

Academic support especially for students with learning difficulties – dyslexia assessment or note taking in class, etc.

External Referrals

Housing

Domestic violence

Mental Health/ Physical Health interface

Legal Advice Forums and The Citizens Advice Service

Drug and Alcohol Teams

Youth Support Services

Appendix 8: Summary data from the participants (Table A, B, C and D)

The Sample

10 ex-students from Northsall were interviewed. Five from Faculty A and five from Faculty B. Their responses have not been summarised because their responses have been covered more fully in the main discussion chapter and in Appendix 10. Three tutors from Northsall were interviewed as well as three Student services officers (SSOs) named in the research as June, Mike and Sally who were from three different FEIs, including Northsall, which all offer HE courses. Tutors Dee, Martin and Stella all from Northsall were also interviewed, one was from faculty A and two from faculty B. Selected data from all interviews is included here. The transcriptions were analysed in a variety of ways using thematic analysis. To give an overview of the emergence of the themes, these tables were produced.

Student Responses:

Table A: Summary of Student Attitudes and Outcomes

The following table of ex-student data summarises their autobiographical information and key responses:

Name and degree subject (O=Older student)	Positive/Negative Experience of college	Previous HE in family	Tutor support Y/N	Relationships with other students	Length of attendance	Reason for leaving	What they did next
1.Gill Photography	P	N	Both	OK	5 months	Mental health/not coping with the workload	Not specified
2.Ellie Fine Arts	N	N	Both	None	Over 2 years	Ill health became acute.	Not specified
3. Valentina O Travel and Tourism	N	Y	Y	OK (from previous course)	Majority of top up year	Not right top up course and too different to FD Difficult life circumstances	Not Specified

4. Ross Sports studies	Both	Y	Y	OK (from previous course)	6 months	HE not for them now.	Got a job
5. Karla Criminology	Both	N	Both	OK	Less than a month	Ill health Found course hard	Not Specified
6. Julia O Art and Design	Both	-	Y	OK	About 2 months	Death of Mother Wrong course	Continued in previous career.
7. Jake O Journalism and Media	P	N	Y	OK	2 years	Ill health	Returning to course next year as now well
8. Lana Photography	Both	N	Y	Too young	3 years	Mental ill health Factors outside Northsall Workload became too much	Not Specified
9. Leah O Health and Social Care	N	Y own	Both	OK	Few months	Could not access course materials and got behind with work.	On job training
10 Kane Business and Management	N	N	Mainly Y	OK	5 months	Mental ill health	Level 2 in Health and Social Care

O = Older learner who is 25+ years. College records revealed that, six of the student participants were younger, aged 18-25. Throughout the discussion of findings, students over 25 years will be referred to as 'older' and those who are 18-25 will be referred to as 'younger' when discussing the ex-student participants. The staff participants often use the term 'mature' which refers to anyone over 19.

Taken from the staff semi structured questionnaire transcripts, tables B, C and D highlight where participant responses are similar as a stage in evaluating the themes within the primary data.

Table B: Why do students leave their courses or struggle with them?

Tutor Dee	Tutor Martin	Tutor Stella
Mental ill health	Offered full time work.	More mature students have life experience and are more likely to stay.
Not forming positive peer relationships	Personality – not having a drive to do well.	Poor motivation and not enough determination
Needing to work as no other means of financial support.	Cannot make links between the theory and their vocational experiences or aspirations.	Personal problems outside of college.
Wrong course choice	Do not understand that academic skills are transferable.	Struggle with the demands of the course and HE study.
Struggle with the demands of the course and HE study.	Personal disagreements between student peer groups as groups are small in, HE in FE	
Course was not what they expected.	HE in FE Students believing their degree will be like school or college and are not resilient to timetable or tutor changes.	
Moving out of the area		
Not being able to be resilient to major life events		
Poor support from parents		
Mental ill health	The course is too difficult.	
	Transition directly from level 3 study which do not prepare students for HE study	

SSO Jane	SSO Mike	SSO Sally
<p>Expectations of students. Not what they thought it was</p> <p>Too hard academically and behind with work</p> <p>lost interest in that discipline or wrong career choice</p> <p>HE Different to FE and not prepared for independent learning or poor transition to HE</p> <p>No peer support.</p> <p>Poor relationship with staff but different in different subjects (Don't ever give reason as relationships with tutors but may be indicated by career choice)</p> <p>FE better relationship and attachment with tutor</p> <p>Personal life</p> <p>Finances</p>	<p>Personal issues</p> <p>Poor engagement with the course</p> <p>Finances including student finances.</p> <p>Academic issues</p>	<p>Expectations of students. Not what they thought it was going to be (IAG)</p> <p>Too hard academically and behind with work</p> <p>Lost interest in that discipline</p> <p>Receive offer of employment,</p> <p>No longer believe they require that qualification to pursue a certain career.</p> <p>Mental ill health</p> <p>Financial issues</p> <p>Legal problems</p> <p>Autism or other learning difficulty</p> <p>Personal problems such as: Relationships Family member crisis Accommodation Moving abroad</p> <p>Expectation of parents to go to college and not what the student wants.</p> <p>Poor support from parents</p> <p>Resilience or personality</p> <p>Mental ill health and workload pressures</p> <p>Relationships with tutors</p> <p>Relationships with other students</p>

Table C: Risk factors which may predict leaving

Tutor Dee	Tutor Martin	Tutor Stella
Lack of parental support	Have a set career goal or are looking for employment.	Poor motivation and commitment to study
Struggling financially		Personal problems which affect study
Not learned to be independent (personally, not educationally)	Do not understand independent learning and not taking 'full ownership' of learning.	Poor transition between level 3 and 4
Unrealistic expectations of study at degree level and poor attitude to learning.	Come from BTECs at level 3 and expect 'spoon feeding'.	Struggle with the demands of HE study.
Making the wrong friends on the course	Do not understand the requirements of study at degree level.	Poor support from their tutor who lacks passion, patience and empathy
Transition from a BTEC course at level 3 which is 'spoon fed'.	Difficulties in student peer groups	
	Not taking the identity of being a HE student	
	Working part time	

SSO Jane	SSO Mike	SSO Sally
<p>Poor transition level 3 to 4 or even 4 to 5/6</p> <p>Student expectations of HE</p> <p>Poor resilience or wrong time of life</p>	<p>Poor attendance</p> <p>Poor Student support with the course (moving from part time to full time for more support)</p> <p>External students who do not know tutors or Northsall.</p> <p>Students coming straight from level 3, rather than mature students in employment</p>	<p>Transition at level 3 to 4</p> <p>Poor attendance</p> <p>Single parent with childcare issues</p> <p>Students who apply through clearing.</p> <p>Unrealistic expectations of the course</p> <p>Mental ill health</p> <p>Mental ill health with the addition of workload pressure</p> <p>Autism or Learning difficulties</p> <p>Personal issues</p> <p>Poor organisation of the course</p> <p>Mature students returning to education.</p> <p>Poor relationship with tutors</p>

Table D: What can be done to support students to stay?

Tutor Dee	Tutor Martin	Tutor Stella
Reflective and reflexive tutoring which responds to student needs both pastoral and academic.	An enthusiastic and experienced tutor who tailors their teaching to HE in FE student needs.	Regular individual tutorials
Tutors being emotionally available to students and forming a close relationship.	Bridging courses so students understand the requirements of academic study.	Tutor spending more time with students to overcome their barriers to study and knowing students.
Tutors managing student peer groups to ensure positive relationships.	Pastoral support and monitoring student engagement (Through the VLE, attendance, etc.)	Support with academic writing and researching information.
Tutor managing student expectations and teaching emotional regulation.	Supporting students to understand the advantages of completing a degree.	Support with critical thinking and applying it to assignments.
Tutor having high expectations of students.	Residential experiences for the student group to build positive relationships between tutor and students and student peers.	Transition between level 3 and 4 including study skills.
Guiding students through the development of their study skills		Relationships with tutors who can motivate students and help them through difficulties.
Ensuring all students basic needs are met – warmth, health and food needs.		Taster sessions
Consistent and appropriate timetabling.		Transition period at the start of the course
Ensuring the curriculum is contemporary and students can relate to it.		Developing students' organisational skills.
Using the SSO to support vulnerable students.		
Mentoring by professionals already working in the sector to raise career aspirations		

SSO Jane	SSO Mike	SSO Sally
Attitude of staff and whether student centred.	Timely support and counselling from tutors and act quickly to respond to a student problem.	Timely support from tutors or SSOs Engaging teaching techniques
Checking on attendance and managing students	Student centred curriculum and experience	Pick up attendance issues early.
Relationships with tutors	Success centre for proof reading	Keep lines of communication open with the student.
Culture and high expectations of students	Employer visit or talk to workplace and workplace mentor and Support from the student's employer.	Target support and triage from quick query to individual action plan. One issue can turn into many.
Support mature students who are in employment.	Recruiting with integrity	Signposting to support – counselling, housing, legal and final external to Northsall
Recruiting the right students	Progression from level 3 – Already have relationship with tutors.	Mature students returning to education need reassurance.
Students who join college at HE level are vulnerable.	Having good relationships with student peers which can mitigate for more support from staff	Personality and resilience
Relationships with other students	HE students as part of the overall college community Signposting to help in other parts of Northsall – personal or financial issues.	Tool kit, study skills support Taster sessions
Changing the delivery model of the programme	The authority to make quick and wide-ranging decisions to support students and also mitigate their concerns.	IAG/interviews and careers guidance
Changing the mode of attendance from PT to FT for some students so they get more support	Ethos and culture of staff appreciating student's position in employment and studying and high expectations by staff.	Taking a year out to reflect and mature.
	Staff taking responsibility for student achievement	Work shadowing Trust SSOs to mediate the circumstances they are in

Appendix 9: Pen portraits of the participants

There were sixteen participants who provided data for the research study. Ten were ex-student participants and six were staff participants. They included three staff participants from Northsall and three SSOs, one from Northsall and two from other local colleges who fulfilled a similar role. A brief pen portrait will now be provided for all the participants in the research. All the participants were white with no declared ethnicity. This reflects the local population.

Student participant pen portraits

The following are brief pen portraits of the ten ex-student research participants. They were asked for an indication of whether they were below or above the age of 25, which is broadly an adult or older learner at degree level, and they are referred to as 'older' or 'mature' in the research. Those below 25 are referred to as 'younger'. The split of students between the two faculties was even, five from each.

1. Gill

Gill is a younger student who had enrolled on a Photography course in faculty A at Northsall. She attended for five months. She had previously completed a year on a graphic design course at degree level and despite having a poor experience of tutors on that course, she felt she did know what would be expected of her at the point of enrolling. She struggled with the workload at degree level study due to mental ill health which became acute during the course. She felt that if tutors had helped more with her academic work, she could have stayed and completed the course.

2. Ellie

Ellie is a younger student who enrolled on a Fine Arts course in Faculty A. She attended for three years because she repeated a year, but still only completed up to level five (second year of degree level). She left due to a pre-existing physical illness which she felt could have been better accommodated with greater flexibility of delivery on the course, such as recorded sessions which she could play back when she felt better. She had good relationships with the tutors, but felt they were not able to make up for her missing course content.

3. Valentina

Valentina is an older student who had previously completed a Travel and Tourism foundation degree course but most recently was enrolled on a business and management degree top up (level six) in faculty B. She left because she felt she was on the wrong course. She had wanted to complete a travel and tourism degree but that 'top up' was not offered at Northsall at the time so she was encouraged to enrol on the business and management top up instead. She also reported working full time and being a parent, often finding her family responsibilities difficult to manage alongside full-time study.

4. Ross

Ross is a younger student who enrolled on the Sports Studies course in faculty B. He left after around six months of study. He had previously studied at Northsall at level 3 so was an internal progressor to HE in FE study. He talks positively about the course and the tutors, but he changed his mind about his career plans. He had enrolled on his degree programme along with his fellow students from the previous course, but now thinks it may have been too soon for him. He subsequently looked for, and found, employment.

5.Karla

Karla is a younger student who enrolled on the Criminology degree course. She left after less than a month. She joined Northsall from a different local college where she had also studied criminology at level 3. Therefore, she was an external progressor. She suffered from poor physical health herself and also talked about being a carer for relatives. Her reasons for leaving were a combination of problems with her health and attending appointments with relatives which meant she missed content which she found difficult to access subsequently on the VLE. She said she found much of the course content a repeat of her previous study. She also talks about difficulties with the assessment as it was a presentation which made her anxious.

6.Julia

Julia is an older student who enrolled on an Art and Design course in faculty A. She had previously studied at master's level at another institution. She left after two months as her Mother's health deteriorated and unfortunately, she subsequently died. Julia also reports being on the wrong course for her as she only wanted to learn and practice painting, rather than take a qualification. Her difficulties with IAG and the applications process are covered more fully in Chapter 4. She got on very well with tutors and acknowledges the challenging circumstances they faced when the course was changed at a late stage by college management.

7.Jake

Jake is an older student who enrolled on the Digital Journalism and media course in faculty A. His partner was also doing a degree at Northsall at the time of the interview. He attended for two years before leaving. The full degree programme is three years and he intended to return to complete it in the future. He left due to acute physical ill health which became incompatible with study. He talks about making the decision to leave as very difficult. He talks positively about Northsall and his tutors and he looks forward to returning to Northsall.

8. Lana

Lana is a younger student who enrolled on the Photography course in faculty A. She attended classes for three years because she re-sat a year, and it was a three-year degree programme. The re-sit meant she had to join a new cohort of students which she found difficult, but she says she enjoyed the course and would like to have completed it. She found most, but not all, tutors supportive. She left due to acute mental ill health but feels she may have been able to complete with a bit more support from the college.

9. Leah

Leah is an older student who enrolled on the Health and Social Care course in faculty B. She had attended courses at Northsall before, including a recent access course and says she enjoys college study. She experienced issues with accessing the college's VLE from the start of the course and they were never properly resolved. This led to falling behind with her studies due to not having access to the resources she needed. She is now not sure it was the right course for her and perhaps should have considered a nursing degree course elsewhere. She reports difficulties with tutors leaving and therefore not being able to offer her support consistently. She now works at a local hospital and has now accepted training at her workplace.

10 Kane

Kane is a younger student who enrolled on a Business and Management course in faculty B. he attended classes for about five months and worked and studied part time. He struggled with the work required at degree level and admits he did not understand it. He is very positive about help from tutors but combined with developing acute mental health problems he eventually left. He has now changed career to do a level two course in health and social care which he really enjoys.

Tutor participant pen portraits

Dee

Dee is a lecturer in legal systems, the course tutor for the Criminology full time degree courses and also a curriculum leader in faculty B. She had been teaching at the college for fifteen years with, she thinks about five or six of those in the HE department. She talks about HE tutors needing to have emotional intelligence and to be non-judgemental of students. She expresses an awareness of the WP cohort at the college and the pressures students may face in their personal or work lives which could impact their study and believes that it is the tutor's role to help and support with pastoral care as much as possible. She is proud of her track record with supporting HE in FE students and in that current year she had retained 26 out of 28 students in 2016-17 who started the course.

Martin

Martin is a course leader for the full-time sports studies degree programmes in faculty B. He had been working at Northsall for three months and also had five years of previous experience in teaching HE in FE at another local FEI. His perception of HE in FE in comparison to traditional HEI practice seems to inform his teaching and approach to students. He also strongly believes that for his students, financial considerations often outweigh the desire to study and this can mean HE in FE students are not retained. His approach to teaching students tends to place the balance of responsibility onto the student, rather than the tutor. However, he also understands the additional support WP students may need to study and tries to offer it. He often contrasts the support he offers with his own expectations and experiences of higher education.

Stella

Stella is a course leader for photography in faculty A. This course has a full time and part time route. Part time students, who form the majority of the evening provision tend to be almost exclusively WP with family and work responsibilities as well as studying. She has been at Northsall for ten years and taught on FE courses initially, moving into HE in FE after the expansion of this provision in the college five years ago. Her teaching philosophy seems centred on the vocational nature of the programmes and ensuring that students can apply theory to practice. She talks a lot about supporting students individually to develop their academic skills and motivation. She recognises that there is often not enough time and resources to support WP students as much as she would like.

Student Services Officers (SSO) pen portraits

June

June works at a medium sized GFE college and has a HE in FE provision (Ofsted report, 2016). She works as a support tutor within the HE provision. The role started with an exclusively academic support for HE in FE students but, by her own admission, it has developed into some pastoral support. June's role was created as part of a Government funded project which [another GFE college locally] have been running this role for two years and they think it's quite successful so, in partnership with [June's college] secured HEFCE funding to set up higher education academic support tutors in two further GFE colleges locally. The funding was until March 2019, although June has been retained in her role beyond then. The aims of the project are : To increase retention, achievement, attainment and facilitate progression, particularly in students from lower socioeconomic classes, students with a learning difficulty or with a mental ill health and from data for the three colleges there's a particular emphasis on young, white males. June herself worked as tutor and a manager in a HEI for some years prior to this position. She took her current role to get back to working more directly with students. Her background seems to inform her focus on supporting HE in FE students to develop their independent learning skills and aspire to be like students in HEIs.

Mike

Mike works at a smaller GFE college with a small HE in FE provision (Ofsted report, 2016). Mike is a manager with responsibility for the teaching, learning and assessment for a curriculum area. The HE in FE provision in the college is so small, that his role includes both teaching on a HE programme and a supervisory position which means he is consulted about student retention matters and offers advice in the same way that the other SSOs do. In the last few years, he had also been the assistant principal of a larger GFE college and therefore had significant experience of managing in the FE sector. His position as both manager and tutor gave him an insight into on the financial dilemmas and pressure which FE colleges can face when trying to effectively support students. The dissonance he can feel between supporting the students, supporting the staff and meeting his institutional targets is apparent in his transcript.

Sally

Sally works at a larger GFE. She has worked there for eight years, the first three in an FE department and five years ago she moved across to work with HE students. She came to the college straight from her own degree level study and empathises with the experiences of, often WP, Higher Education in FE students. Her role is wide ranging and covers many aspects of student support and engagement, including attendance monitoring, coaching students with personal issues and making appropriate referrals for support (such as those in Appendix 7). She also mediates between staff and students who are struggling to stay on their HE in Fe programmes. Sally is the only staff participant who has never taught, but she does draw on her personal experience of HE study when advising students.

Appendix 10: Nine ex-students' resilience tables

The remaining seven ex-student participant's stories will be mapped against Figure 4 in the main thesis, Chapter 5, section 5.1.5 (Figure 4, page 196). Then the issues will be taken from the student stories and placed on a resilience table in the same way as Julia's, which is also in Chapter 5 (Figure 5, page 199). I have left the scoring on the tables blank, unlike Julia's in the main text. This is because the scores against Julia's story were illustrative for the purposes of demonstrating the retention 'toolkit' and represent my assessment of the strength of the stressor, rather than Julia's own. Only the student themselves can definitively determine what stress to their resilience, if any, is posed by individual factors. The act of completing the scores is dependent upon the personal significance of the issue to the student and, to be meaningful to the student concerned, needs to be done by them or in conjunction with their tutor or SSO. The intention is to open up a conversation between the student and staff member which the research has found to be important to supporting student resilience and ultimately retention. The extrapolation in this appendix is illustrative.

1. Leah's table

The flow chart in Figure 4 (page 196) could also be mapped to Leah's story as she had previous positive experiences at Northsall and good motivation to study (box 1,2,4). Then she experiences difficulties with accessing learning materials as an institutional factor which could risk withdrawal (box 5,6,7,10). This led to falling behind with her studies due to not having access to the resources she needed. When she cannot access the help, she needs to resolve her IT problems, it becomes a major issue (box 11,12). She is now not sure it was the right course for her and perhaps should have gone onto a degree course elsewhere. She cannot get support from her tutors as experiences a lot of difficulties with them leaving and therefore not being able to offer her consistent support (box 13)

She marshals her own resilience to make further attempts to mitigate these factors by continuing to ask for help from tutors, IT support services and even the head of the department still do not resolve her institutional stressors (box 16,17). College interventions

are therefore insufficient and untimely. Ultimately, this means she drops out of her Higher education in Further education study (box 19,20,21). Leah's story has also been mapped onto a table to assess enablers against stressors. It is a summary of her resilience factors, staff and students could assess the scores as a shared activity:

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Meeting the course requirements		Difficulties with accessing course materials.	
Positive previous FE experiences		Unable to resolve these ICT difficulties herself and unable to get help from staff, the head of department or the wider college to resolve them which escalated the problem to a major issue	
Leah demonstrates good personal resilience in continuing to seek support to resolve her problems and reporting the issue to the head of department		This leads to doubts about being on the right course for her	

2. Ellie's table

Ellie was a student who enrolled on a Fine Arts degree course in Faculty A at Northsall (box 1). She attended for three years because she repeated a year, so completed up to level five (boxes 2,4). She left due to a pre-existing physical illness which she felt could have been better accommodated (boxes 5,6,7,10). The structure of the course and deadlines for submissions did not meet her health needs and she missed classes (boxes 11,12,). Ellie would have liked greater flexibility, such as recorded sessions which she could play back when she felt better. She had good relationships with most of the tutors but felt some were better than others at explaining the work. She felt her tutors offered support, but it was not always what she needed or in the way she needed it and they were not able to make up for her missing course content. She did not believe making friends was important and she did not make any. She eventually left as she missed too much course content (box 13).

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Ellie completed three years of study so is able to study and seems to have good personal resilience.		Periods of ill health and medical appointments were not catered for on the course and Ellie missed content	
		Tutors were not able to offer the academic support she needed, just pastoral support.	

3. Valentina's table

Valentina had previously completed a travel and tourism foundation degree course and most recently was enrolled on a business and management degree top up (level six) in faculty B (box 1). She had wanted to complete a travel and tourism degree but that 'top up' was not offered at Northsall at the time. This meant Valentina started the course with a major stressor to her resilience (boxes 2,3). The content of the business and management course she did take did not meet her needs or interests (boxes 5,6,7). She did not make friends on the course as the other students had formed friendship groups already from their previous course. She also reported working full time and a parent and reports her life as, 'complicated'. She left because she felt she was on the wrong course (box 8). She speaks positively about the tutors on the course and their ability to support her with understanding the work, but it was the wrong content as far as she was concerned and so her staff support was not effective for her. (boxes 11,12,) Valentina admits that she did not want to get 'low grades' and would rather have left than do that, which she did (box 13).

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Previously completed a course of study at HE level so likely able to study at degree level		Made the wrong course choice	
		Working full time and having parental responsibilities	
		'Complicated' personal life	
		Unwilling to complete the course with 'low grades'	

4. Ross's table

Ross was a student who enrolled on the sports studies course in faculty B (box 1). He left after around six months of study. He had previously studied at Northsall at level 3 so was an internal progressor to Higher Education (boxes 2,3). He had progressed to HE along with his fellow students and so had supportive relationships with them. He talks positively about the course but feels he changed his mind about his career plans (boxes 5,6). He made the decision to leave. This meant that despite reporting positive relationships with tutors, they were unable to influence Ross to stay on the course. (boxes 7,8) He now thinks it may have been too soon for him to do a HE course. He left the course and subsequently looked for, and found, employment.

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Completing previous level 3 and so is able to commit to study		May experience stress from level 3 to 4 transition.	
		His feelings about HE in FE study changed, he felt it was too soon for HE study and wanted to look for employment	

5. Karla's table

Karla enrolled on the criminology course (box 1). She left after less than a month. She joined Northsall from a different local college where she had also studied criminology at level 3. Therefore, she was an external progressor and may have had less knowledge and information about what the course may entail. She also suffered from poor physical health and her resilience seemed poor at the start of the course. (boxes 2,4) She also reported being a carer for her wider family (boxes 5,6). Karla also felt the course content seemed a repeat of her previous study. She also talks about difficulties with the assessment as it was a presentation. Her reasons for leaving were a combination of problems with her health and needed to attend appointments which meant she missed content. She found difficult to accessing the VLE to catch up difficult and this became more serious as the course

progressed and the work, she missed increased (boxes ,7,8). She had friends on the course and reports a mix of good and bad relationships with tutors but does not believe they could have helped her to stay (boxes 11,12). She reports leaving due to difficulties in her personal life and on the course as she did not want to do the presentation for the assessment (box 13).

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Completing previous level 3 and so is able to commit to study		Karla unhappy with the course content she felt was repeating her pervious study	
		Poor physical health and attending health appointments with family she cared for meant missed content	
		Difficulty accessing the VLE to catch up with course work	
		Karla did not want to do the assessed presentation and no other option seemed possible.	

6. Lana's table

Lana was a student who enrolled on the photography course in faculty A (box 1). She attended classes for three years because she re-sat a year and it was a three-year degree programme which demonstrates her persistence and resilience (boxes 2,4). The re-sit meant she had to join a new cohort of students which she found difficult (boxes 5,6). Previous ill health, depression and anxiety returned and became acute (boxes 7,8). She found most, but not all, tutors supportive. The help they offered was with managing her work, deadlines and workload (boxes 11,12, 13). The help she felt she needed was outside college, counselling, etc. She says this was not offered to her at college, even though Northsall does have a counselling service.

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Completing previous level 3 and so is likely to be able to commit to study		Joining a new cohort of students which means peer relationships and support are lost	

Attending for two years indicates good motivation to study and resilience		Depression and anxiety returns and becomes acute	
		The support offered to Lana did not meet her needs. She was not offered counselling which is available at Northsall	

7. Kane's table

Kane is a student who enrolled on a business and management course in faculty B (box 1). he attended classes for about five months, worked and studied part time, so his resilience is difficult to assess without consulting him. As a first generation HE student his knowledge of study may have been limited (boxes 2,3). He struggled with the work required at degree level and admits he did not understand it. He has now changed career to do a level two course in health and social care which he really enjoys so HE in FE study may not have been suitable for him at this time (boxes 5,6, 7,8). He is very positive about help from tutors but talks about not being able to make use of their help as he did not understand their explanations. He did not want to trouble them further by asking for multiple explanations (boxes 11,12). Further developing acute mental health problems led to eventually leaving (box 13).

Enablers	Strength	Stressors	Strength
Completing previous level 3 and so is able to commit to study		Worked and studied part time	
		First generation HE	
		Struggled with the work required, found it hard to understand. As he is now on a level 2 programme, he may have been on the wrong course for him.	
		Was unable to make use of the support offered by tutors.	
		Mental ill health became acute	

Appendix 11: Example checklist to assess student resilience on HE in FE programmes

This checklist could be used as an initial stage in the retention ‘toolkit’ to try and gain an idea of the HE in FE student’s vulnerability to not being retained. It should follow a discussion about the meaning of resilience and how helpful or otherwise the concept may be to understanding how HE in FE students can be retained on their programmes of study. It could enable staff, and eventually management, to be alerted to possible individual retention problems and perhaps ultimately to college wide issues. Following a class wide session to use this, the table which is based on Lewin’s (1947) forcefield model could be used in follow up small group or individual sessions. This is so that the student themselves could raise their awareness further of positive and negative stressors in order to try and work out how they could facilitate more of Eisenburg et al.’s, (2009) ‘enablers’ to their study and enough individual resilience to complete their degree level programme.

Dear Student,

Your personal tutor and course team hope that you are enjoying your degree level course at the college. In order to effectively work together to ensure you succeed in your studies, we would like to take this opportunity to invite you to assess how well you are managing with the demands of the course and whether you may need any additional help or support. Please answer the following questions as honestly as you can. Your personal tutor will be inviting you to discuss the outcome of the results with them, but if you feel there is anything you would like to discuss more urgently you can contact..... (tutor) or(designated support staff/SSO) at any time.

Student self-assessment

Please put a tick in the appropriate box to indicate how you feel about this statement at the moment:

Score against the statement	Description	Score against the statement	Description
1	Completely Agree	6	Disagree a little
2	Substantially Agree	7	Disagree a lot
3	Mostly Agree	8	Mostly disagree
4	Agree a little	9	Substantially disagree
5	Neither agree nor disagree	10	Completely disagree

	Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
A	The advice and guidance I received when joining this course was helpful and described fairly closely what the course I am taking is like.										
B	(students who are working) My employer is supporting with me attending my course at college										
C	Outside my lessons, the college services, such as IT and student support are effective for me.										
D	I can usually meet college taught session attendance requirements										
E	I have built a reasonable or good working relationship with my tutor.										
F	I feel my tutors understand me and how I am able to learn.										
G	I get on alright with the other students on my course.										
H	Attending lessons matters and the college will get in contact with me if my attendance gets worse.										
I	Can talk to my tutor or someone else at the college about a difficulty I am having either on the course or in my personal life and I know they will listen to me and try to help.										
J	I am someone who is determined to complete my course and get my qualification.										
K	I do not have any physical health problems or those physical health problems I have feel manageable to me										

L	I do not have any mental health problems or those mental health problems I have feel manageable to me										
---	---	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Total / 120

Outcomes

When marks are added up for all Questions. Does this reflect how you feel about your course at the moment?

0-19 – I am feeling good about my course and feel like I am progressing.

20-59 – I am feeling alright about my course at the moment.

60- 79 –I am Struggling with my course and need help from the college.

80- 99 – I am struggling a lot with my course and need urgent help from the college.

100- 120 – Having great difficulties with my course and feel like I cannot cope. I would be happy to accept help from the college offered now but it may be too late.

If you think your score does not reflect where you are on this scale, and you believe you are really 60 or above, make an appointment with your tutor or other designated support staff and discuss where you are and what help you think you need right now.